

White House press briefing

08/27/21

2:03:35 p.m.

1 minute and 31 seconds

PHIL MATTINGLY: Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Bob Menendez put out a statement that said, in part, “we can’t trust the Taliban with American security” in terms of — in the wake of the attack yesterday, and I don't want to get into a semantic debate about the word trust, but I guess my question is — is the coordination with the Taliban the best of bad options right now or is it the view from the military and from the White House that it was the only option given the dynamics on the ground?

JEN PSAKI: Maybe both, and I will say — I know — I won't get into a semantic debate, but I think it's worth repeating as often as I can that we don't trust the Taliban. This is not about trust, but there's a reality on the ground. And the reality is the Taliban control large swathes of Afghanistan, including the area surrounding the perimeter of the airport, so by necessity, that is our option to coordinate with to get American citizens out, to get our Afghan partners out, to get individuals who are eligible for the range of programs the United States has out, and we have evacuated more than 105,000 people out as a result of those coordinated — in large part as a result of those coordinated efforts of getting people out, but I will say that, as — as the department of defense noted earlier today, clearly something went wrong here in the process that we saw the ISIS-K attack occur yesterday. We don't have additional information to suggest that it was, you know, intentional or anything along those lines, which was a question that was asked yesterday, but clearly, there was a break in the security process here. There's no question about that.

(...)

2:08:14 p.m.

2 minutes and 24 seconds

PETER DOOCY: When the President says we will hunt you down and make you pay, what does that look like? Is he going to order a mission to kill the people responsible or would he be satisfied if they are captured and brought to trial?

PSAKI: Ah, I think he made clear yesterday that he doesn't want them to live on the Earth anymore.

DOOCY: Okay. And as the — as the U.S. is coordinating with Taliban about security for the next couple of days, some people running security for the Taliban in Kabul are terrorists with millions of dollars worth of bounties on their heads. Are we going to try to bring those known terrorists to justice before we leave the country?

PSAKI: Peter, the focus is on getting the remaining American citizens who want to depart out of the country, to get our Afghan partners, as I just said in response to Phil's question, this is not a

preferred relationship or a situation that we would have designed if we had started from scratch. I think that's very clear, but right now, we need to coordinate. That's our focus for the next couple of days.

DOOCY: And the last one. You said that you think we're going to have a great deal of leverage over the Taliban after we leave. You think we're going to have more leverage with no troops on the ground in Afghanistan than we do with thousands of troops on the ground in Afghanistan?

PSAKI: Well, to be clear, one of the steps that the president directed his secretary of state to take, which was in my statement this morning, was to engage with our international partners to determine what the path forward looks like. And there are key components here. The Taliban are going to want a functioning airport. So do we. There's an enormous amount of economic leverage that the global community has. That's something we need to work with our international partners on. As we have more to update you on, we will update you on it.

PETER ALEXANDER: In terms of the President's commitment to make those responsible for yesterday's attack pay, is the President committed that, even after American troops leave Afghanistan, he would be willing to send in American troops — even in some covert form — to complete that mission to kill those who are responsible?

PSAKI: I'm not going to get into details from here on what going — hunting down and — and going after the terrorists who killed 13 service members will entail or detail and I don't think the department of defense will either, but that will — he — that commitment will remain until its done.

ALEXANDER: Suffice to say it means the potential exists for troops to go back into Afghanistan even after the 31st?

PSAKI: Again I won't get into the details of what that would require but his commitment remains until it's done.

ALEXANDER: Understood.

(...)

2:13:01 p.m.

1 minute and 18 seconds

AYESHA RASCOE: I know that there have been a lot of questions about this but I just really want to try to get some clarity around after August 31, for people who will still be on the ground in Afghanistan and want to get out, is — does the U.S. right now have a vision of a process that they will use to get people out after August 31? Like, and what is the commitment after August 31? Is it absolute? If you want to get out of Afghanistan and you are, you know, and you helped the U.S. Military, you're an Afghan, you'll be able to get out? If you're a green card holder or someone else to get out, will you — is the U.S. guaranteeing to be able to get out?

PSAKI: I don't think we can guarantee but what we can do is work toward and this is what what the President directed the secretary of state to continue diplomatic efforts with international partners to secure means for third country nationals, Afghans with visas who may be eligible for our programs, of course, any American citizen who remains in country to leave the country even after the U.S. military presence ends. There's a means of mechanisms for that. Those conversations are ongoing. That's the objective. Our commitment does not change on October — on August 31. We obviously need to figure out the operational mechanisms, which is the conversation that's underway.

(...)

2:14:54 p.m.

2 minutes and 7 seconds

MICHAEL SHEAR: The administration, the Biden administration is filled with people who've had a long experience with Afghanistan. Many of them dating back years if, you know, not decades.

PSAKI: Including the president.

SHEAR: Including the president. Most of that time, the Taliban was the sworn enemy. I mean, it was the enemy against who we fought. Is there a recognition inside the administration of the irony — sort of grim irony of being in a position to rely upon and coordinate with and have negotiations with the — the adversary that they fought — many of them fought for — for two decades.

PSAKI: I think irony is far too light of a term. I mean, our — the reality is here — as kind of to Phil's earlier question, this is the circumstance we're faced with. The Taliban controls large swaths of the country. This is not what anyone anticipated at this point in time. In order to get American citizens out, in order to get our Afghan partners out, in order to get card holders out, we need to coordinate with the Taliban. We've been able to evacuate more than 105,000 people as a result. This is not the only place in the world where we work — we have to work with adversaries or people who have been enemies at times to further U.S. national security objectives. That's part of what you have to be flexible to do when you're running the United States or when national security teams are looking to achieve our objectives around the world.

SHEAR: I guess that one was a little bit more of the emotional side of it. I mean, do you sense from inside the administration that the meetings you are in, a kind of, um, resignation or frustration or whatever you want to call it with the sort of situation that they find themselves in?

PSAKI: I —

SHEAR: In that regard, particularly.

PSAKI: — no, okay, I understand your question. I would say having sat in a lot of these

meetings, there's just not a lot of time for self reflection right now. The focus is really on the task at hand and as — even as we're talking about these threats that are acute and ongoing and increasing, we're focused on that and what the information is that's incoming, what steps we can take to get more people out over the coming days or the remaining days. So, I wouldn't say there's a lot of focus on self reflection at this point in time.

(...)

2:28:12 p.m.

2 minutes and 47 seconds

STEVEN NELSON: The Democratic congressman Seth Moulton told journalist Hunter Walker — a former White House colleague: “Even if you completely agree with the Biden administration's decision to withdraw, the way they have handled this is a total f-u-c-k-u-p agenda.” President Biden firmly committed last night to evacuate any remaining Americans, but you seem to say just now, “I don't think we can guarantee that.” So, which is it?

PSAKI: I think the question was actually about individuals who are still there because they don't — they're not prepared to leave or other Afghans or others who may want to depart. Just for clarity. I know you care about context.

NELSON: So there is a commitment to evacuate all Americans? And if so, does that mean that there's some sort of deal with the Taliban?

PSAKI: I don't even understand what your question is.

NELSON: The question is that there would — the airport evacuation obviously was disorganized. It was criticized even by Democratic congressmen. Is there actually a plan behind President Biden's commitment to evacuate any remaining Americans?

PSAKI: I think the fact we've evacuated more than 105,000 people including — and I can give you all the latest numbers which I know the state department is giving or about to give. So, of — of those evacuated since August 14, we've evacuated at least 5,100 U.S. citizens, likely more. We've received confirmation within the last day more than 300 additional Americans were evacuated. Based on our outreach, there are approximately 500 American citizens we are currently working with who want to leave and we are communicating directly and in direct contact with them. That speaks to our commitment, I think. [TO ANOTHER REPORTER] Go ahead.

NELSON: And my second question on the topic is yesterday, the conservative transparency group Judicial Watch released Secret Service records on dog bites involving the First Dog, Major. One e-mail said that Secret Services agents bitten every day for eight days March 1 to March 8 and a white house visitor was as well. At a March 9 briefing, you only described one biting incident to us and the dogs and described the dogs as being — whisked back to Delaware on a pre-planned trip to visit family friends. Obviously, that is not the world's most important

story, but it is significant because we expect honest information, even for minor stories. So, can you explain why there was a kind of misleading account presented to us and, if we can't get honest information about minor stories, why should we have faith in the administration's account for larger issues, like Afghanistan?

PSAKI: I know you do keep the dog in the news in the briefing room, so thank you for that. As we've stated previously, Major has had some challenges adjusting to life in the White House. He has been receiving additional training as well as spending some time in Delaware where the environment is more familiar to him and he is more comfortable. I don't have additional specifics, but I think that speaks to where Major is located, to be fully transparent in your — in your ongoing interest in the dog.

(...)

[Final briefing questions for VOA's Steve Herman before retirement]

(...)

2:36:04 p.m.

3 minutes and 8 seconds

PHILIP WEGMANN: I wanted to return to the binary, continuing a forever war —

PSAKI: Mmhmm.

WEGMANN: — that both Republican and Democrat administrations oppose, that the polling showed the majority of the country opposed and then the withdrawal and the idea that, you know, no matter what, that that was going to be messy. Given the events of the past two weeks, does the President feel that U.S. military personnel were put in the best position to carry out their mission on the ground?

PSAKI: Well, I — I would say first that anything the U.S. military has asked for as they're working to implement this mission, they have been granted. And I think that they would confirm that as well and the President asked them that at the end of every meeting. And I would also note something that was said yesterday at the Department of Defense briefing, which is that they know — and this is why the men and women of the military are so amazing and incredible. They know they are putting themselves in harm's way when they are working to implement missions like these and they work to implement plans and put together plans that have force posture protection front and center, but when we're dealing with a real threat from ISIS-K, you know, of course, events like yesterday unfortunately happen.

WEGMANN: And then, yesterday, the President said that — that he made the assessment after talking to his military advisers that Bagram Air Force Base was not a — much of a value.

PSAKI: Mmhmm.

WEGMANN: I'm curious because General Milley earlier in August said, "if we were to keep both Bagram and the embassy going, that would be a significant number of military forces that would have exceeded what we had" — or "stayed at the same or exceeded what we had." Was that decision about leaving that Air Base — was that because it wasn't a value add or because it would have required, you know, sending more troops over there?

PSAKI: Well, Bagram is — was an enormous base that required an enormous presence. It also made it — it also had a significant different — distance, I should say, from Kabul. Significant, I guess, is all relative but it's farther — it's far away from Kabul, so it would have required quite a presence to protect and it wasn't located in a place that would have been as effective in evacuating people who are located in Kabul.

WEGMANN: And a really, really quick one —

PSAKI: Yeah?

WEGMANN: — the President said yesterday: "we have greater threats coming from other countries. A heck of a lot closer to the United States." Is there any — anything to tell us a little bit? Like, what countries he was referring to in particular as opposed to Afghanistan? It's a bit of an alarming statement.

PSAKI: I don't — I think he was intending to convey what he's conveyed many times about the metastasizing threat from a range of terrorist organizations that have greater capacities around the world and how we need to keep the eye focused on those as being one of the root reasons why he brought our men and women home. Go ahead.

REPORTER: Does the administration have any guarantee from the Taliban not to harm Americans who are left behind or who choose to stay behind in Afghanistan after August 31?

PSAKI: Well, that is certainly our expectation, yes. And what we're working through.

(...)

2:39:53 p.m.

1 minute and 25 seconds

KIMBERLY HALKETT: You said it's easy to be a critic from the outside, as we've heard from lawmakers, but some members of the Marine Corps have taken to social media and they're criticizing not the president but top generals for failing to be accountable for a strategy they say cost lives. For example, we've just been talking about Bagram, the closing of that no longer had the high trauma capabilities to deal with some of these horrible and horrific injuries and that the airport was ill equipped. Any sort of serious injury, you'd have to be medevacked to Germany. Was this a miscalculation on the part of the generals? And — and with regard to the President, he said he was listening to his generals. Two questions really quickly on that.

PSAKI: Sure.

HALKETT: Does he believe he was given bad advice? And will he ask for any resignations of his generals given the high cost to — of American and Afghan lives?

PSAKI: No to both questions. I think that what the President looks at, the events of yesterday as, is a tragedy and one that was felt viscerally by the leaders of the military as well. And losing members of your men and women working for you from the service branches is devastating. It's devastating for the president. It's devastating for the leaders of the military as many times as it's happened. And it is a reflection on all of them and the people on the ground that they're continuing to implement this mission even under difficult and risky circumstances.

(...)

2:44:11 p.m.
38 seconds

SEBASTIAN SMITH: A follow-up about the relationship with the Taliban —

PSAKI: Mmhmm.

SMITH: — looking forward. So, the U.S. obviously has got some ongoing asks of the Taliban like some cooperation on helping to get future people out.

PSAKI: Yep.

SMITH: And presumably looking for these Islamic State folks. What are the Taliban asking in return? Are they asking for resignation? Are they asking for an embassy to be put back there? What's — what's their kind of big ask?

PSAKI: I think it should be really clear here. There's no rush to recognition of any sort by the United States or any international partners we have talked to. I am, as I said in the past, blissfully not a spokesperson for the Taliban and I would ask you to ask them that question as to what they want.