

Rep. Mac Thornberry
Ranking Member, House Armed Services Committee

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DWG: Congressman Thornberry, thank you so much for joining us this morning.

Mr. Thornberry: Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

DWG: Obviously the timing is an interesting one. Your committee's been hard at it recently and there's a lot to talk about.

Because we're on a call I don't have a way to see people putting their hands up. I'm going to down a list of the folks who signed up for this meeting in the order in which they signed up and ask them if they have a question and I think we'll find many of them do.

But I'll start by asking the first one, if I may, as I usually do. And it's a fairly general one. Under your chairmanship and since then Mr. Smith's, yours has been a committee that tries to emphasize bipartisanship approaches and has succeeded more than many other committees in that approach. But still there are differences I know between the Republican view and the Democrat party view within the committee on what should be in the budget.

Why don't I start by asking you, there's a lot that you like obviously in the budget and voted for but what are some of the two or three maybe key issues where you're concerned because the budget doesn't have things you think it needs to have or goes in directions that worry you. Highlight for us, if you will, just two or three issues that are still causes of concern that you're going to be pushing on in the process.

Mr. Thornberry; I would just say initially, David, that I am hopeful, I'd say very hopeful that at the end of the full committee this week it will, there will be widespread bipartisan support for the product. I think what you've seen so far in all the subcommittee marks, in what Chairman Smith's chairman's mark for the full committee provisions, not the way I would have written it. I do have some issues which I'll mention a couple of them. But on the other hand we see I think both sides trying to work together. Not be needlessly provocative. And if that attitude holds through the full committee markup and the House Floor, then we can get to conference with bills that are very easily conferencable I think and get a conference report done on time. That's my hope. I think we're on that track and I hope we stay on that track.

Just a few of the things I would say in the Chairman's mark that do cause me some concern. One of them is the reductions in funding for our partner forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. I'm not saying that you have to provide every dollar, that every dollar is essential for Afghan Security Forces, for example, but we have obviously drawn down our presence in Afghanistan. We are depending upon the Afghan Security Forces to take on the bulk of the job not just against the Taliban but against al-Qaida and ISIS and the other terrorist groups. And we're also counting on the Afghan Security Forces to provide force protection for us, which gets into the news of the day I guess.

But my point is, I think we ought to be very cautious about cutting support for partner forces upon whom we depend for, among other things, protecting our own folks.

Needless to say, everybody knows we have had differences regarding the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay every year, but under Democrats, Republicans, Congresses, Presidents, a certain three restrictions have been in place. My understanding is they're in the Senate bill, they're not in the House bill so that gives me some concern.

And one other thing I'll just mention right quick is we saw last year far more extraneous issues on our bill than normal. We often have dogs and cats where people just want to hitch a ride to get signed into law. Last year we had a ton of stuff that was not our jurisdiction. We see some of that this year already. I'm afraid it may get worse because there are so few legislative vehicles moving within any prospect of being signed into law.

So the problem is when you get all of these extraneous things on your bill, then it stands the risk of bogging it down, preventing it from passing, distracting from the primary purpose of the bill which is to support the men and women who serve us.

So just in a general sense these extraneous issues, bad now. I worry that they're going to get worse. And that could pose some jeopardy for us.

DWG: Moving to questions by others. First on my list is Michael Gordon of the Wall Street Journal.

DWG: Sir, I have a question for you on the timely matter.

You wrote a very strong letter to the White House earlier this month objecting to President Trump's plan to cut the U.S. presence in Germany in half essentially, and you pointed out that it would interfere with exercises, create logistical problems and basically rewards Russian aggression.

In your conversations with the White House and with the administration is there anything that you've heard that suggests that they won't execute this by September as National Security Advisor O'Brien specified in the Cabinet memo? And do you think Congress will do anything or can it do anything to stop a move that people on a bipartisan basis seem to think would really strike a blow against NATO and undermine our defenses against Russia, particularly in light of the new revelations about the bounties in Afghanistan?

Mr. Thornberry; I think it is possible that we may have a provision in the markup on Wednesday that will address this issue. It is totally unrealistic to assume that you would take thousands of people out of Europe by September 30th. Where do you put them? Where's the housing? Where's the facilities for their kids, schools, all of those things?

So I think part of the reason I was so concerned about this is I think this idea or this plan, such that it is, came from a couple of people in the White House without DoD input, really. So I think DoD has been trying to look at okay, here's some options and here's what it would take and so forth. But I think as you point out, there's widespread concern about anything that we would do that would benefit the Russians, would disillusion our allies. That does not mean every body in Germany has to stay there forever, but there has to be some tie to strategy and our national interest, not issues of personality and so forth.

I think we will do something and hopefully some cooler heads are prevailing about the consequences.

And let me just back up. One other thing to just mention, there's one set of issues about withdrawal out of Europe; but it's a different set of issues about an absolute troop cap. You can never have more than this many Americans in Germany at one time. That's what gets to limits on exercises, about using Germany as a transit to go to other theaters and so forth. That's just silly.

And so that's just an example of how I don't think there was appropriate planning, homework, however you want to describe it in throwing this idea out there. Now maybe that was the intention, to see what the reaction is. I don't know. But I think we will do --

DWG: Can I just ask you what you're planning to do on Wednesday? Can you please just spell it out a little bit? What

exactly are you going to do on Wednesday to stop this or to try to stop it?

Mr. Thornberry; Well, we're still in discussion. I think it is, as you point out, it is important to be, if possible, bipartisan and have a consistent approach across the committee.

And I'll say one other thing. I think we all want to be sensitive to any commander-in-chief's authority as far as moving troops around. That's why I say it does not seem wise to me to say everybody in a particular place has to stay there forever.

So we're looking at options that force a discussion and consideration of our broader strategic issues. And I would say what's really important to me is to mandate consultation with our allies. Mandate consultation with Congress.

This thing, again, by a couple of people thrown over the wall was not thought out and ill advised, and I could come up with some other adjectives probably.

But if there's going to be a repositioning, we've got to consult with our allies, with Congress, with the services on how they would implement such a thing. I think that sort of thing would be reflected in whatever we do.

DWG: I'm going to go down this list as I mentioned. Perhaps some of the names I call out won't be on the call or may not have a question. If I call your name and you don't have one, just say so. But I'm going to go next to Tony Bertuca of Inside Defense followed Caitlin Kenney of Stars and Stripes.

DWG: Thank you, Mr. Thornberry, for your time this morning.

I wanted to ask you, you mentioned earlier divisive issues. I wanted to bring our attention to the Wall for a moment because the Court has recently ruled that the President shouldn't be moving Defense Department money to do things like build the

Wall. We know now that 4,000 additional troops are going to be sent to the border in the fall. So it just seems like this might be one of those topics that is too tempting of a divisive issue to leave out of the bill.

I'm just sort of wondering what your view of this issue now is? Now that we have additional facts about it. Now that the President has taken actual weapon systems money, especially money that was intended for the Guard. Where are you at right now in all this?

Mr. Thornberry; I would say, Tony, a couple of things. One is, in Chairman Smith's mark there are some restrictions related to the Wall which I would not put in there, but they are more modest than we've seen in previous years.

Secondly, you're right. A fair amount of money has moved from other programs to Wall construction but a great deal of that money has yet to be obligated, much less spent. So there's a fair amount of money in the pipeline.

Absolutely, the Wall is a contentious issue, always has been, will be, but in previous years in both the authorization and appropriation we've found a way to navigate through. And my view is, use what we've done before. Navigate through in the same way, so as not to let this issue hold up the whole bill. Again, not everybody's been happy with what's happened in previous years, but when you consider the amount of money in the pipeline, some limits but not going as far as before in the mark, I think we may have a vote or two on it but I do not think it will be an issue that holds up the whole bill.

DWG: Thank you very much.

DWG: Caitlin Kenney?

DWG: I guess my question is, you mentioned earlier the news about the bribes in Afghanistan. Is Congress looking at doing

anything or looking into figuring out now that the information is out there, what is, I guess, Congress' response to that?

Mr. Thornberry; Well, over the weekend Chairman Smith and I insisted on a briefing from DoD on the intelligence immediately. Early this week. And I think it is absolutely essential that we get the information and be able to judge its credibility. Because as I'm trying to read between the lines, I know nothing about this, by the way. I have not seen any intelligence. So I'm just going by the press stories. And as I read between the lines it sounds to me like the pushback is well the source really wasn't credible and so we didn't think it was serious enough to brief the President and Vice President. Well, this is a very serious and very disturbing allegation if true. I understand the point that you don't go running to the President with every source that walks in the door. You've got to establish credibility and verify in some way, but when you're dealing with the lives of our service members, especially in Afghanistan, especially these allegations that there were bounties put on American deaths, then it is incredibly serious and we in Congress need to see the information and the sources to judge that ourselves. And it needs to happen early this week. It will not be acceptable to delay or so forth.

So we've asked for the full Armed Services Committee to get this briefing either today or tomorrow. As I say, we made this request over the weekend and so far we've not gotten a response.

DWG: Lauren Meier of the Washington Times if you're on, and Leo Shane of Military Times will be next.

DWG: Back to the budget a little bit, I kind of have a two-parter. You briefly touched this a bit but I'm hoping to kind of firm it up.

What do you see are the biggest differences between the House version of the NDAA and the Senate version that we [inaudible]. And then part two is, last year with the Wall we saw that as a

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major sticking point during conference. Do you anticipate a similar situation this year, but potentially in another area like nuclear funding or troop withdrawals? Thank you very much.

Mr. Thornberry; Honestly I have not gone in detail through the Senate bill, and I probably won't until they're off the Floor. So I'm not very well positioned to say here are the biggest differences.

But maybe it's based on my experience, but I'm just looking at the difference between last year and this year. Last year they were, the differences were massive. From what I just scanned about the Senate Bill and at least what the Chairman's mark is, and the subcommittee products, then we're playing, if you'll excuse the metaphor, between the hashtags. We're in the middle of the field here and that's why I said as long as it stays that way I don't foresee that difficult a conference and being able to get our bill on time.

There could be amendments that are adopted in full committee. Last year on the Floor was a travesty. There was one substantive Republican amendment allowed and all of these others. I don't think we're going to see a repeat of that, by the way. But it made conference very difficult when you had such a one-sided product last year. But I think everybody learned from that experience. We ended up with a good conference report that the President signed, it was just long and painful.

So I think and I hope that we're not going to see a repeat of that this year.

Is it possible that some issue or other could hold it off? Sure, there's always going to be differences between the House and the Senate. But as I say, my mental picture is playing in the middle of the field and the differences such as they are will be able to be resolved.

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DWG: Leo Shane, Military Times?

DWG: Thank you, sir, for hopping on the call here.

I wonder just looking at this bill overall, obviously a couple of provisions in here dealing with Coronavirus and the ongoing pandemic issues, but I wonder if you feel like there's enough flexibility to deal with some of the personnel stuff that isn't immediately apparent here? We've had a delay of moves. We've had a lot of upheaval with childcare. I know you've got your childcare provisions in there. But is there -- I guess my question is, is there enough money, is there enough flexibility in here for DoD going ahead over the next 12 months, 18 months to react to the effects of this?

Mr. Thornberry; Probably not is the answer. And I think we've had this conversation before. COVID has inflicted a number of direct and indirect costs on DoD. As well as direct and indirect costs on people, on our people. We've got the backup caused by stopping moves has still, has repercussions throughout the force. But my view was we have a two-year budget deal, we ought to move ahead under that two-year deal in order to stand the best chance possible of getting the authorization and appropriation bill done on time. Because if you try to keep adjusting to meet all of those added needs then you're automatically, it seems to me, pushing off when the bill will be enacted and absolutely guaranteeing that we will not have it done on time.

So in addition to getting the resources, there's also a timeliness element which we go through every year.

So my hope is that we can stick to the two-year budget numbers, know that they're not enough to meet all the COVID costs, but get that done on time and then be ready for any future COVID supplementals to address these extra costs whenever that bill may be moving through.

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Now it may be sooner, it may be later. I don't know. But get the basis done. Get that locked in and then be ready for these added costs. That's been my view of the situation. And it's also true that money will not solve all of the effects of these family backups and the other personnel consequences that come from COVID.

So your point about flexibility is something that we need to stay engaged with the department about, and as they identify needs then I think we need to be receptive to that increased flexibility between accounts, among accounts. You know, whatever the case may be.

DWG: Rachel Cohen, Air Force Magazine, followed Sandra Erwin of Space News. Rachel, are you on?

Sandra Erwin, are you on the line?

DWG: Hi, good morning. Thank you so much, Mr. Thornberry.

I wanted to ask you about DoD's internal stuff. I know you've been very involved in every organization of DoD and specifically the acquisition when it was split into A&S and R&E. There's some language in the strategic force subcommittee markup that raises some questions about who should be doing what? Why is Missile Defense Agency with R&E and not with A&S? And it seems like this reorganization just continues to raise more questions. And your committee does not seem to be too happy with what's been going on. Can you talk about sort of what you expect? How do you expect DoD to fix this problem? Thank you.

Mr. Thornberry; It's a good question. I would say I still believe that splitting A&S and R&E was the right decision because AT&L had just gotten too big, too cumbersome to deal with all of the responsibility that had been placed under it. And we had to have a greater focus and emphasis on the future and developing future capabilities, and that's really what R&E is supposed to do and I think has been doing to a large extent.

So it is absolutely true that when you split something like this it's messy and there are some hard cases. Where does MBA go? You know, and you can make a case both sides and so forth. So I'm not saying it's all been done perfectly or that there are not still adjustments that need to be made. But I think the fundamental issue of having a separate organization that can put greater focus on research and development and engineering is still the right decision. And obviously acquisition and sustainment. Ellen Lord has had her hands full, for example, through this COVID crisis and to have all of that AT&L in one place again was just too much and overwhelming, even for the best.

So I think it's the right decision. Yeah, adjustments back and forth. But especially when you look at some of the capabilities that China, Russia and others are developing, it is just essential that we focus on developing and fielding those future capabilities and I think this split helps to do that.

DWG: Do you have a view on whether the Space Development Agency or the Missile Defense Agency should be moved? Do you have any concerns about what's been going on there with those agencies?

Mr. Thornberry; I want to understand, I saw that that was in the strat mark. I don't know all of the reasons for it off the top of my head. So that's exactly one of the issues, for example. I don't know also if the Senate has something like that. But that's exactly the sort of issue that we will discuss in conference and try to weigh the pros and cons when it comes to MDA. They've had some issues of concern. But where is it the best fit? Where does it have the greatest chance for success? I think we'll look at that.

With space, I do think it is evolving and there's a number of provisions in this bill related to Space Force. So exactly where the Space Development Agency fits and what the timeframe is, again, it's an evolving thing. So back to flexibility.

We've all got to be kind of flexible, looking to see if things are working, being willing to make adjustments, and not being overly parochial about any of this stuff. I think that is one of the things that has hurt the department in the past where people have been more protective about losing jurisdiction than they have about trying to see where is the best chance for success organizationally.

DWG: Lauren Williams of FCW you're next, if you have a question. And Josh Rogan of the Post will be next.

DWG: Thank you for doing this, sir.

Just to kind of continue on Sandra's themes since you've been, since you've championed for reforms and reorganization. What's your perspective on DoD's efforts to implement the reform efforts that you've put forth in the past, particularly in the last NDAA regarding the fourth estate that really comes to mind? Do you think that they've done enough? Are you looking for them to do more? Your thoughts on that.

Mr. Thornberry; They've never done enough. And so part of what I'm trying to do in this bill is push them to do some of the things that we've told them to do in the past. And so I think I understood from the beginning that we could change the laws but to get meaningful acquisition change in the department would take some time and require a change of culture and attitude as much as anything else. And again, that takes time.

So I think just more broadly, what you're seeing is a change of culture with greater flexibility, program managers being willing to stick their neck out a little bit and experiment and try things, even not before they know whether it will succeed or not. You know, all of that is what we've been trying to work towards. Streamlining and so forth. And I've got some other provisions in this bill related to that.

So I guess the broad answer is I think we are starting to see

some real payoff in what we've done in recent years. No, they're not moving fast enough. No, it's not enough. And we're trying to hold their feet to the fire on some of the things we've already told them to do in previous years. But I think we're getting there, and my great hope is that somebody will be nerdish enough to take this up when I'm gone to keep the pressure on. Because this is not an area where we're going to pass the law and fix it. It's an area where Congress and only Congress can keep pushing and pushing and pushing to make it better.

And let me just give you one example at the risk of going on too long here.

We started a couple of years ago a project to simplify the acquisition bill. And we put it into law, basically the table of contents on how it will be organized. So we've got provisions in that we're dealing with this year to take the next steps. And you think well that's kind of a goofy thing. But it turns out as I have gone around the country and visited with small and middle sized businesses who might want to do business with DoD, the thing I've heard over and over again is I can't figure out what the law and regulations are. It's too complicated. And if you look at the code, it is stuff that has been stuck here and there over the years without any logical sense to it at all.

So one of the things, and as I say, nerdish as this sounds, is to simplify and put the code in some sort of accessible organizational structure so that it's not so hard to do business with DoD. That's the sort of stuff that makes a big difference over time. So those are the sorts of things that we've got to stay after.

Josh, are you on?

Dmitry Kirsanov of TASS?

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DWG: Good morning. Thank you so much for doing this, Congressman.

I just wanted to ask you if considering what the Russians are saying and what the DNI is saying and what President Trump is saying, is there an intent here to get to the bottom of those allegations about Russia in Afghanistan? Or it's one of those things where it's, you know, [inaudible] already made without a trial?

Mr. Thornberry; What the President and the DNI have said is that the President was not briefed, which to me is a very concerning statement. Given everything I said earlier, I don't know the credibility of the information because I have not been briefed, but anything with any hint of credibility that would endanger our service members, much less put a bounty on their lives, to me should have been briefed immediately to the commander-in-chief, and a plan to deal with that situation.

So I don't think, again, we insisted that we see for ourselves what the intelligence is and I think you'll see a bipartisan, and you already have publicly, but it's even stronger non-publicly an insistence to see the intelligence.

DWG: Do you plan to raise this issue with the White House and with the intelligence community to get to the bottom of this?

Mr. Thornberry; I'm sorry, I missed the first part of the question.

DWG: I wanted to ask you if you're planning to raise this issue further with the White House and with the intelligence community.

Mr. Thornberry; Yeah, as I said, we have insisted that the full Armed Services Committee be briefed on the intelligence and so that we can see the credibility of it and we also want to see the time line on when we know what because according to press

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reports there was a meeting at the White House in March on this topic and I don't know how far this goes back, when we knew what. So it is essential I think that Congress know it, and depending on those answers it may be appropriate for people who should have briefed the President to be removed if they did not follow their responsibility.

DWG: Yasmin Tadjdeh of National Defense Magazine, you'll be next if you're on, followed by Roxana Tiron of Bloomberg Government.

DWG: Thank you. Thank you, sir for doing this.

In [inaudible], how would you like to see the Defense Department and defense industry be supported? And do you expect that to happen in July?

Mr. Thornberry; I'm sorry, I missed the first part.

DWG: Sorry. In a new stimulus bill, how would you like to see the Defense Department and the defense industry be supported in terms of funding and extra money? And then do you expect to see that happen in July?

Mr. Thornberry; I don't know timing. The plan as I understand it is after Thursday the House will not meet for two weeks while the appropriators are meanwhile working on their bills, and then we'll come back in for two weeks in July to do our bill on the Floor as well as the appropriation bills. Well, that's a lot to get done in two weeks.

So I don't know about timing. It may be later than that, but obviously that depends on a number of issues other than just defense.

As far as what, I thought Ellen Lord helped me at least understand some of the COVID-related expenses at DoD when she testified before us a couple of weeks ago. So programs are

delayed, that makes them more expensive. There are issues related to the industrial base, especially single source suppliers who may not be able to stay in business given shutdowns and what not. So you've got all of those industrial base issues. We talked earlier about the personnel issues. So there's a whole field of things there. Then you have the whole series of issues about how do you operate a military with this virus that is literally around the world, how do you carry out your missions and keep your people safe? And there's a cost to that as well.

I don't have the total, I don't think anybody does by the way because it's still an evolving thing. Ellen Lord mentioned I think a range of industrial base costs as of some date, I can't remember what the date was.

So at least we're starting to get some idea of a handle on the extra costs that should be considered in any further COVID supplemental for DoD. And as you know, there was about \$10 billion that went to DoD in one of the first bills, but that was really direct costs or support or others for the interagency. Flying stuff around and all of that. So it didn't really get at the extra costs incurred by DoD as a result of COVID.

So there hasn't been much done in this area. I think it needs to be. I don't know when it's going to be.

DWG: I have a follow-up. Do you think there will be widespread support to help the Defense Department in the next stimulus bill?

Mr. Thornberry; I'm sorry. There's something about the connection. I couldn't get the first part of it.

DWG: I'm sorry. Do you think there's going to be widespread support for [inaudible] in the stimulus for the Defense Department?

Mr. Thornberry; I don't know. I think it would be part of a bigger bill and I think the support will be dependent upon what that bigger bill looks like, to tell you the truth. And there's a whole variety of issues that are outside my primary focus about further economic stimulus for all sorts of things.

So I don't know what all of those things will be, but it's pretty clear, I would just say this. It's pretty clear that the world is not going to be safer on the other side of COVID and that we are still going to expect the men and women who serve to carry out their missions under all circumstances. And what I don't want to do is ask them to keep the high tempo while resources are shorted. We saw what happens when that occurs and so if we expect them to do their job we need to do our job and fully and adequately support it.

DWG: Roxana Tiron of Bloomberg Government followed by Nick Schifrin of PBS.

DWG: Good morning and thank you very much, sir, for doing this.

I have a question about one of the more looming issues on the defense authorization debate on Wednesday. Where do you stand on the provisions or the amendment that's likely going to be introduced in removing confederate symbols from military bases and renaming military bases named after confederate generals?

Mr. Thornberry; Well, after the Secretary of the Army mentioned that he was willing to examine this issue, my comment was I think it's appropriate to examine this issue. And I do. I think it is. But I think it's important to examine it with appropriate, with the appropriate input, not making rash decisions in the heat of the moment.

For example, if you're going to rename Fort Hood or Fort Bragg you need to talk to the local communities about how they feel about it. About what it would mean for them and if they think that it should be a different name, what are some of their

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ideas? You need to talk to the service members who are there or who have been there, the retiree community and so forth.

So I think there are still discussions between Republicans and Democrats on the Armed Services Committee about the best way to move forward on this. I think most everybody is willing to move forward in some way. It's a question of how and when and for me, making sure that all of these folks who care about this, have an interest in this, are heard from. So that's at least where I'm coming from.

DWG: So at this point you wouldn't be supporting Mr. Bacon and Mr. Brown's amendments?

Mr. Thornberry; There are still conversations going on about details, because that's what we're really talking about is details. And so there's still conversations going on about exactly what amendments may be offered and what they will have in them. At least from my vantage point they have been very good, instructive conversations where everybody is trying to get to a similar place. So it's been positive and constructive.

DWG: Nick Schifrin, PBS?

DWG: Thank you very much for doing this.

Can I go back to Afghanistan and broaden out the conversation a little bit? You mentioned that it might be appropriate to actually remove officials if they didn't brief the President as they should have. Do you have any notion of whether those briefings might not have been held because either it was not clear yet, as the President's defenders are saying, or perhaps that maybe some people were purposely keeping information from the President for fear of leaking out?

And then to broaden the conversation about Afghanistan, what is your sense of plans right now to drop down the number of troops there to either 4500 or a little more than 5000 given the

ongoing violence [inaudible] at U.S. soldiers, but increasing assassination attempts against Afghan civilians? Thanks.

DWG: On the first part, as I mentioned, I do not know the credibility of the information and therefore I cannot know why the President, the Vice President would not have been briefed about it. I don't know. And I try to make that clear. It's just a very disturbing allegation or report and I want to know much greater details about where the information came from, how the conclusion was reached, if it was. Again, I'm just based on the press reports that y'all have been reading too. Before I say for sure.

But it's such a serious matter that -- so I don't know about the credibility, I don't know what the motivations would have been for not briefing the President, but we need to get to the bottom of it and we need to do it now. Again, this week, before Congress leaves on the 4th of July.

More broadly on Afghanistan, as you know, we have gotten down to 8600 and as you also know the level of violence everyone agrees is too high. I saw there were other assassinations in Kabul this weekend of human rights folks.

So I think in light of the level of violence, and certainly in light of these allegations, to go below 8600 would be a tragic mistake. The last thing we want to do is say if you pay a bounty to kill Americans then you can make them leave somewhere. That would be horrible.

So there is a peace agreement that we are a part of. Everybody needs to comply with that peace agreement. And what the Taliban wants more than anything is for Americans to leave. Well, we won't leave if they are not fully and totally in compliance with their obligations. Then in addition to that what we cannot do is have this idea that if you just target enough Americans then you can force them out. That cannot be the case in Afghanistan or anywhere else. That will just increase the incentive to have

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bounties on our soldiers all over.

DWG: Thank you. Jeff Seldin of VOA. Are you on the line? Bill Gould will be after you.

DWG: Thank you both very much for doing this.

Congressman, getting back to Afghanistan, this isn't the first time there have been concerns raised about Russia's activities in Afghanistan back to 2016, 2018. Various Pentagon and defense officials were talking about how the Russians were providing the Taliban with weapons and training. Given that history, is it concerning that these allegations weren't taken more seriously since officials previously said Russia was meddling in the process and trying to play both sides?

A second question about Syria. Is there anything under consideration that would boost funding to U.S. partners in Syria like the SDF, especially given that the SDF in particular is still holding about 10,000 ISIS fighters in detention and thousands more ISIS family members, they're responsible for security in IDC camps. That situation is still pretty volatile.

Thank you.

Mr. Thornberry; I'm going to have to remember the first part -- oh. Russians have tried to cause mischief to us in Afghanistan for some time. And I agree with your point that we should always be hyper vigilant about what they're up to because they seek to give us a black eye, especially there given the history, but also in other places in the world.

I do think it's fundamentally different in many ways to put -- and again, I'm just going on press reports. I don't know what the intelligence says. But if there were bounties put on we'll pay you so much if you kill an American, I think that is in a different level from providing weapons or some of the other things you mentioned. It is so egregious that if, in my view if

there were a hint of credibility to it then you need to bring it to the President's attention and there needs to be a plan on what you're going to do about it. That's a very egregious step.

In Iraq and Syria. I mentioned earlier, I am concerned about the Chairman's mark on reductions on the Iraq partner forces train and equip funding. You're right that our partners in Syria are still doing very good important work with us. I don't have in front of me numbers on that. But we need to support them, especially after everything that's happened in recent years. You know, ISIS has not been totally extinguished. We need those partner forces on both sides of the border to stay after them, to keep the pressure on, just like we need partner forces in Afghanistan to keep the pressure on. That's the reason I mentioned at the beginning of the call my concern for reducing that support when we are so dependent upon it.

DWG: Joe Gould, Defense News.

DWG: Thank you so much. Thanks, Mr. Thornberry.

You took a couple of related questions about defense reforms, but I wanted to know, the Senate bill was doing away with the Chief Management Officer position and I wanted to know if you support that, and if not, how much would you plan to fight back against that if it came down to it in conference?

Mr. Thornberry; I would say I've come to the conclusion based on the Defense Business Board study that that's the right thing to do. And just to back up for a second, remember the CMO position, at least as currently constructed, was a product of Congress. And the main thing we were trying to achieve is to have somebody like a service secretary over the defense-wide agencies, the fourth estate, if you will. So we created it, we've been tinkering with the authorities. And I just think there is very little disagreement with the conclusion of the Defense Business Board study, and man, they talked to all sorts of folks, they did all sorts of work. It was very thorough in

my view. And basically they came to the conclusion that nobody could do this job. That the authorities and the responsibilities are not aligned. And then they gave three options. One is to create another Deputy Secretary of Defense to do it and a couple of other lesser options.

So I've had conversations with members of the Defense Business Board. I have talked with the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary on this issue. And I have come to the conclusion that Congress is largely responsible for making this an impossible job and we need to figure out something different. So that's my view. I may well have an amendment to that effect this week.

DWG: You anticipated my follow-up question, if you were going to have an amendment on that. Okay. We'll look out for that.

DWG: Rebecca Kheel of TheHill, you're next. Followed by Christopher Woody of Business Insider.

DWG: Good morning.

I wanted to follow up on the confederate named bases with you. I just want to make sure I understand your position correctly. Understanding that there are some negotiations going on, it sounds like what you're saying is you would not support an amendment that required the bases to be renamed [inaudible] studies the issue and then gets back to Congress and you decide where to go from there. Am I understanding that right?

Mr. Thornberry; I guess that's part of the conversation. Do you make them change without asking communities and service members whether they want to change? How, and under what time frame do you do this? That's part of the conversations we're having.

As I said, I think it is absolutely appropriate to look at this issue. I just am always hesitant about Congress having a know-it-all attitude without even talking to the folks who live

there.

Understanding the country's eyes -- I will say this. The country's eyes have been opened a lot on residual racism and evidence of it over the past several weeks. And in many ways I think that's a healthy thing. So I see that the state of Mississippi's looking at changing their flag. And a whole variety of things are happening.

So I think that's good. The country is changing. We just need to again, not assume that we know everything in Washington better than the rest of the country knows.

We ought to push forward on this. Exactly the details about what is required, under what time frame, et cetera, that's what we're talking about.

DWG: Thank you.

DWG: Chris Woody?

DWG: Thank you, Congressman.

Regarding the Indo-Pacific Reassurance Initiative, I just wanted to ask you generally, in your mind what is the posture the U.S. military needs to adopt in the Indo-Pacific? What does it need to change in that regard? And what capabilities and assets need to be prioritized in order to affect that posture.

Mr. Thornberry; I would just say when it comes to the Indo-Pacific Defense Initiative, the idea is to have dedicated funding focused on working with partners, whether it is training exercises, whether it's facilities, logistics, whatever the issue is on what it takes to work together, have a dedicated fund focused on that part of our mission. It's worked very well I think by all accounts in Europe. Indo-Pacific is our priority theater. We ought to have it there. We passed it in the House two years ago but the Pentagon didn't do anything, and so what

you're seeing this year bipartisan, bicameral is okay, we're going to make y'all do it. And so where do I go to look for what ought to be done? I look at the things that are in the administration's budget request. I look at things that are in the unfunded requirements list. I look at things that Admiral Davidson put in his report that we required of him in last year's bill on the things that he needs. Again, focused on how do you work together with others? And so the Chairman's mark has I think a lot of good things in there. I've got a couple of other things that we're talking with the other side about that I think would be very helpful, that Admiral Davidson has asked for.

And so the key this year is get going. We've had two years of delay because the Pentagon was afraid, I think, of losing money or something. I don't know. But now you've got Secretary Esper has voiced support. Again, you've got Republicans, Democrats, House, Senate. So the key thing this year is to get going.

DWG: Thank you, sir. Just to quickly follow up you mentioned a couple of commands and unfunded priorities present there. Have you looked at all at General Berger's force structure and do you support what he's trying to do at the Marine Corps in that regard?

Mr. Thornberry; Yeah, I have tremendous admiration for General Berger, what he's trying to do, where he's headed. He is looking forward and man, that is something that should be applauded. And he's doing so in the face of some resistance as far as the Marine Corps' missions in recent years.

So yeah, it probably has implications for the Indo-Pacific but also other places. I think he's, I admire him for what he's doing and I think that's generally the view within the Committee as well.

DWG: We've reached 9 o'clock. Do you have time for one more?

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Mr. Thornberry; I can.

DWG: Terrific, let me see whether or not the next person on the list is with us. Scott Maucione of Federal News Radio. Are you there? And do you have a question?

No? Okay. I'm going to move to Sylvie Lanteaume of Agence France-Presse. Do you have a question by any chance? Are you with us?

I thought that might be the case.

How about Ashley [Roke] of Jane's?

You know, what I think we should make this the better part of valor and say --

Mr. Thornberry; I think we've worn them all out.

DWG: Yeah. That's good. That's what we try to do.

Thank you so much for taking the time on this Monday morning to talk through this. A lot of different issues were covered. A lot going on. But it's great to be able to talk to you, Congressman Thornberry. It always has been and it is again today.

So I'll close with that and just thank Carnegie Corporation of New York for providing the funding that makes this possible, and has been stalwart supporting us even through the pandemic as we've had to go virtual. And members, we do have additional meetings planned in the coming weeks so you'll be getting more invitations.

Again, thanks everyone. This concludes our Defense Writers Group conversation with Mr. Thornberry, the Ranking Member of the House Armed Services. Bye for now.

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