

News; Domestic

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(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[13:00:26]

CHUCK TODD, MSNBC HOST: If it's Tuesday. A perilous moment for President Biden is the security situation Afghanistan, the surging Coronavirus, and the Capitol Hill fight over his entire legislative agenda are all poised to get worse before they have a chance to get better. And that's our National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan is expected to at least have to answer some questions on the White House briefing room as President Biden tries to focus on why we're leaving Afghanistan rather than how.

Plus, the Biden administration now supports a third vaccine shot for most Americans. Mark eight months on your calendar. Go check out your vaccine cards because at your eight-month anniversary from dose two, it's time for dose three.

Welcome to MEET THE PRESS DAILY. I'm Chuck Todd.

Another busy August day here in Washington. This hour, we expect to get an update on the situation in Afghanistan when the White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki will be joined by the National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in the briefing room. We'll go live to the White House when that begins. And in the next hour, we expect to hear from the State Department for their update as evacuations continue at the Kabul airport. One would assume this is going to be semi-orchestrated here in Washington. First, the White House then state.

This morning, the Pentagon confirmed at their briefing that the Kabul airport is secure and that the Defense Department's goal is to have one flight leaving per hour within the next 24 hours, and they hope to move out five to 9000 evacuees per day. Those operations were suspended though for part of yesterday as Afghans desperate to flee the country, rushed the tarmac at the airport, this is going to be the scene that will always sort of mark withdrawal from Afghanistan for us.

Defense Officials say as many as 800 passengers left from the Hamid Karzai airport overnight once operations resumed and U.S. troops continue to arrive and to create a perimeter. by the end of today, as many as 4000 could be on the ground in an attempt to assist in evacuations.

This photo of hundreds of Afghans crammed into a U.S. military cargo jet just shows you how dire the situation is for those that feel the need to get out in any means necessary. The passengers desperate to escape the Taliban simply crammed onto the flight from Kabul to Qatar.

And then assigned of its control over Afghanistan, the Taliban held its own news conference today as the Pentagon confirmed U.S. military leaders had been in touch with the Taliban.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MAJOR GENERAL HENRY TAYLOR, JOINT STAFF DIRECTOR OF CURRENT OPERATIONS: We have had no hostile interactions, no attack, and no threat by the Taliban. We remain vigilant. We also have not experienced any additional security incidents at H. Caya.

JOHN KIRBY, PENTAGON PRESS SECRETARY: The coming out of General Mackenzie's discussions with senior Taliban leaders in Doha, our commanders at the airport are in communication with Taliban commanders on the ground outside the airport and there have been discussions, there is communication between them and us and I would just let the results speak for themselves.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

TODD: You could see we don't want to say we're negotiating with the Taliban or we're asking permission from the Taliban, they're being very careful with their words. We expect National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to face questions just exactly what are the communications with the Taliban at the White House briefing in a few minutes.

This chaotic withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan is easily the biggest foreign policy crisis of this young Biden presidency so far but it also comes at a time when Biden's domestic problems are also piling up. The U.S. just tapped 37 million COVID cases. We have five states reporting a record number of cases as the pandemic which appeared to be under control just a month ago, continues to worsen, and of course, that has an economic impact.

Then, of course, we have the situation at the border. This was supposed to be the time we'd start to see the border lead up a little bit but guess what, we saw a record number of illegal crossings last month, despite the heat.

Then there's the increasingly complicated process of getting his agenda through Congress. That's going to be a big-time mess. And an upcoming recall election of California's governor, it's a bit tighter than Democrats think it should be, and that also just sort of adding it to the pile of major to minor headaches piling up with this White House.

[13:05:01]

TODD: All of it is happening as Democrats are looking ahead to the 2022 midterms, and it's all likely going to get worse politically for this President before it gets better. But the only thing he can be happy about is that the calendar is an odd-numbered year right now, it's not an even-numbered ones.

Mike Memoli is near Camp David, where President Biden is today, Courtney Kube is at the Pentagon for us, Garrett Haake on Capitol Hill, and also with us with some important perspectives is David Ignatius, a longtime Foreign Affairs Columnist at the Washington Post, and of course, an NBC and MSNBC Contributor.

Mike, let me start with you. And with the President at Camp David, how are they feeling now the day after it doesn't -- if the speech was an attempt to at least provide some, I don't want to say unity for the country, but unity for his own party? It doesn't look like it went that well, then.

MIKE MEMOLI, MSNBC WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Chuck, there's just something about August isn't there? As you know, well, from your own time, on this speed in 2009, this was the summer of the Tea Party, the town halls that pose the first significant test for the Obama administration. It was four years ago, almost exactly that President Trump stood in the lobby of Trump Tower talks about very fine people on both sides. And as the story goes, that's what motivated Joe Biden, a private citizen to consider a run for President himself. This is a very critical moment for this administration.

And if there were already not enough warning signs for them, I think we heard two very serious ones just in the last hour on this network. You had Leon Panetta, who either didn't get or quickly discarded talking points from the administration warning about the National Security impact of the President's decision. Leon Panetta, of course, somebody who sat in the Situation Room with a Vice President Biden during a lot of debates about Afghanistan, himself. And then you heard Congresswoman Chrissy Houlahan, one of those members of the class of 2018, that the Biden White House has closely aligned itself with. Saying, frankly, she can't explain. This decision is having a hard time explaining this decision.

That sort of X-Factor politically, for President Biden has been this perception of competency but even more an understanding of the electorate that many others in his party don't necessarily feel they share as well. He's always had the benefit of the doubt, this White House has insisted always that they have a better understanding of what the American people believe then, certainly Twitter, certainly the press, but certainly a lot of the members of their own party, and that very much seems to be in doubt at this moment.

So yes, the President did a very important thing, as far as the administration is concerned yesterday, spoke very quickly, helped to sort of reasserting his confidence in his decision, the White House has needed this time to regroup themselves again because it's August, a lot of them were scattered around, they're really now starting to mount a political defense that is necessary at this moment and we'll see that later this hour with the White House Press Secretary, and the National Security Adviser. But the other thing to keep in mind is that this administration has always, you know, bid at us for jumping to conclusions too quickly.

So, one of the most interesting conversations I've had with a White House official in the last 24 hours was one in which they were asking me questions about how this plays out politically and I think that speaks to the level of uncertainty about this moment for them.

TODD: That's a fair point. Let me move over to Courtney over at the Pentagon. Because Courtney was now you know, if yesterday morning, the conversation of where's the President, he needs to be out there, the paper statement doesn't cut it, he did? I think it's quite telling that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense have not been in front of cameras.

I -- look, there's a lot of ways to interpret it in Washington, that usually, if they don't have something supportive to say they don't want to have to be forced to answer a question, they don't -- that perhaps their boss won't like the answer too. Is that how we should look at this? I mean, the Pentagon is not putting its two most important faces in front of the camera.

COURTNEY KUBE, MSNBC PENTAGON CORRESPONDENT: Yes, It's -- there's no question about the fact that the U.S. military was against the idea of the military withdrawing from Afghanistan. There's -- that's not even in question anymore. So -- but once the President made the decision in the announcement back in April, then you know, you have -- look at what's happened since then.

The military under commander -- the commander -- the commanding General in Kabul at the time, General Scott Miller, they took the order, they said OK we have to get out by September 11 and they accelerated that. They decided to keep for the safety of the U.S. troops who were on the ground in Kabul, they were going to move out before September because that was the safest thing for them to do.

All along, we have been hearing from Defense officials about the need to deal with this Special Immigrant Visa problem or process. The military has been holding drills, they've been prepared to evacuate large numbers, tens of thousands of people if necessary. They were just waiting for the State Department to give them the names and to tell them who to take out and when. I mean really to tell them to do it to move forward.

[13:10:08]

KUBE: And that process just began several weeks ago and -- so there is certainly a lot of frustration about that. But you're right, we have not heard -- we have not heard directly from Secretary Austin or General Milley since this all began. One of my colleagues actually pressed John Kirby about that who has come out, he's been speaking on camera, we expect to hear from him again today probably not on camera.

TODD: Quite a bit.

KUBE: Yes. He has been talking to us and we've -- he's been providing as much information as he possibly can. But you're right, it is telling when we don't hear from the most senior people about these issues. And this is a, you know, you touched on it a bit at the beginning, Chuck, this mission, this evacuation mission, there was a huge hiccup in it. For much of Monday, when -- there we saw these civilians who were flooding onto the runway there and they made it unsafe for flights to come and go.

The mission to send U.S. troops, mainly soldiers and Marines into Kabul, that was stalled for hours. And the mission to get Americans and Afghans out also stalled for hours. So, they are really in an effort right now to not only get this moving again, to ramp it up so that they can get these civilians out as -- and these Americans out as quickly as possible.

TODD: Courtney at the Pentagon for us. Courtney Kube, thanks. So, we move over to Capitol Hill. Garrett, again, as I said, I know, part of the reason for the President to come out and he made a bit more of a political speech, if you will, making you know, essentially making the case against being in Afghanistan any longer, I -- it didn't seem to if it was designed to at least keep the Democratic Party from completely fracturing on this issue, I don't know if it did its job. What have you seen or heard on the Hill?

GARRETT HAAKE, MSNBC CAPITOL HILL CORRESPONDENT: I think there's a little bit of patience among Democrats to see how this airlift operation plays out, to see if, in fact, the U.S. military can stabilize what has been a horrible decision here -- or horrible -- or horrible course of events, I should say at least, over the last few days. But really the only cover that Biden has gotten from Congressional Democrats has ironically come from progressives, from Speaker Pelosi and from the House Democratic Progressive Caucus, who won and out of Afghanistan long before Joe Biden was President, they were most happy with this decision on the front end, they've given him the most cover on the back-end.

But when Congress resumes its session in September, you know, you could potentially see two different Senate Committees, two different House committees doing hearings on this, doing investigatory hearings into the actions of a Democratic White House. That is obviously not a situation that President Biden wants to be in. And more broadly, everything that congressional Democrats and the President have been able to accomplish so far in his term has evolved total unity.

They needed total unity for the rescue package, they need total unity for the infrastructure bill, and for the reconciliation piece, now they don't have it. And even in the last hour, there was a conference call among

Congressional Democrats, with Congressional Leadership really leaning on their members on the infrastructure piece of this but the same is ultimately probably going to be true around Afghanistan.

As is always the case, the party that is most united tends to be in the stronger position, and Democrats are not as of now on the same page about Afghanistan and what to do next.

TODD: Yes, and Republicans may be in disagreement about long-term ideas in Afghanistan but they're unified, the hawks and the isolationist in jumping on and being critical of President Biden.

We bring in David Ignatius here. And David, I want to play this one quote from President Biden yesterday because I actually think, you know, there's a lot of analysis of his speech that he was casting blame in a lot of directions but this part of his speech, I thought, almost absolved anybody of some blame. Take a listen.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JOE BIDEN, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: The events we're seeing now are sadly, proof that no amount of military force would ever deliver a stable, united, secure Afghanistan, as known in history is the graveyard of empires. What's happening now could just as easily happened five years ago, or 15 years in the future. We have to be honest.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

TODD: This was to me, the challenge of the -- of analyzing the President's speech yesterday. Yes, he put himself in the position of, I've been right all along, and everybody else was wrong. See, I told you so. And at the same time, as much as some of his aides want to say, well, the Trump administration tied his hands to do X, Y, and Z, that's not the President's stance. President is basically coming out and saying, you know what, no matter when we withdrew, there's never a good time, and essentially saying, it's possible this would have happened no matter what scenario you would have chosen. Is that how you interpreted that?

[13:15:00]

DAVID IGNATIUS, MSNBC CONTRIBUTOR: I had a similar feeling, Chuck. The way in which the Ghani government collapsed, the inability of the Afghan military that we worked so hard to train to fight effectively around the country and in Kabul, in a sense, seemed to support Biden's view, this just wasn't ever going to work, the time had come to get out.

The caution I'd make is that the force that we had left in Afghanistan was small, it's been small for several years. And as one former senior commander put it to me, we've been buying a term insurance policy with this small force. It's essentially a counterterrorism platform. We gave up long ago whatever ideas we might have had about nation-building, about broad counterinsurgency.

This is term insurance. We buy it year to year with this force under 5000 people in the last several years that allows us to have some confidence that we can deal with the terrorism problem that we know is very real in Afghanistan. That's what I think Biden can be faulted for. He traded this term insurance policy for what, at least in the last week has been chaos. We'll see if things stabilize now with the Taliban taking over, holding press conferences. Mullah Baradar, returning to Kandahar today but I think that's the weakness in his argument.

TODD: Look, we've talked a lot about the domestic political hit the President is taking, is likely to continue to take, I'd like to talk about the global political hit that America has taken. You know, there's some that would argue, well, if you worry about Belarus, if you worry about Ukraine, you worry about Taiwan, yesterday was a bad day. What say to you?

IGNATIUS: So, what we've seen this week, Chuck, is the enormous psychological impact of American decisions. If ever, you wanted a demonstration that credibility, reliability, staying the course makes a difference, just look at how quickly the Afghan army, everything in Afghanistan collapsed.

So, I think it's right to worry about knock-on effects, American credibility does matter, I'm concerned that Jihadists around the world who really were in retreat after the defeat of ISIS, after so many successes the U.S. has had will now be emboldened, they'll say. The Taliban held out and they won and here they are their governing Kabul again. And then we really have again, a global problem to worry about.

TODD: You know, you start to look at sort of America's role leading the West in this century. And whether Libya triggered up, you know, you could say directly or indirectly triggered a migration crisis that's created a political crisis in Europe, it's possible this triggers a migration crisis that can trigger some political crises. Is it fair to say that that sort of the West, whether it's the United States or the EU but generally I mean, this is a lot of defeats for sort of the Western point of view of the global order?

IGNATIUS: Well, our way of stabilizing things is not proven successful, certainly our ability to use military power to achieve political goals is not that effective at all. And in Iraq, and now, in Afghanistan, and we've seen the destabilizing effects of this refugee migrant flows on Europe.

Europe's political problems, Europe shifts to the right was generated in significant part by the refugee streaming out of out -- of Syria, out of Libya, out of -- out of Africa and there's more of that ahead. I worry about that knock-on effect in particular. We could have one to two million Afghan refugees coming out of the country desperately, coming into Pakistan, which is a fragile country in the best of times, coming into Europe, the governments that are so vulnerable to right-wing pressure.

So, I think it's -- as you -- as you're suggesting is the secondary knock-on effects of the destabilization and then -- and then the kind of church, you know, numbers of people who flow out of these countries who were desperate and will go anywhere.

TODD: Well, look, we could get to this longer but it's important to note all of this stuff is connected. It's not disconnected, it's a domino, and one triggers another -- triggers another and I guess we're all just wondering where the next Domino is going to fall. My great reporting team, Mike, Garrett, and Courtney, thanks for getting us started. David Ignatius, always good to get your expertise and thoughtfulness on the air, so thank you as well.

[13:20:04]

TODD: And as we said, we are expecting to hear from the National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, who will be joining White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki for her daily briefing. We'll get the latest in Afghanistan exactly who are we talking with, negotiating with? For the Taliban, what assurances are they giving the United States? We'll bring you all of that live when it happens.

But first, the other major crisis in this country, COVID. A much-needed boost as cases and hospitalizations continue to rise. Americans could be in line for getting a third Coronavirus shot. That's assuming you've gotten one in two already.

Plus, we're live in Alabama where the vaccination rates are still very low and the hospitals are overcapacity.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

TODD: Welcome back. The Biden administration is expected to announce a new recommendation that Americans get a third dose of Pfizer, or Moderna, call it a booster shot, call it a third dose depends on your point of view but eight months after dose two is when they say you should be ready for dose three.

Now the formal recommendation could come in the next few days and it could be implemented as early as September. CDC and the FDA already gave the green light for Americans with compromised immune systems to get a third shot. All of this comes just as the United States passed the threshold for 37 million COVID cases earlier this morning. Daily COVID case numbers have surged to levels that we have not seen since the start of vaccinations.

According to CDC, an average of over 10,000 new COVID patients are being admitted to hospitals daily. Just think about 10,000 COVID patients a day are being admitted. Let that sink in a second. This is with vaccinations folks. And although the rate of COVID in children continues to be relatively low, the pediatric hospitalization rate is at its highest since the beginning of the pandemic.

So, let's -- we're going to talk to an Infectious Disease Physician, and NBC Medical Contributor Nahid Bhadelia in just a moment with some of the medical facts and questions you may have. But Vaughn Hillyard is in Mobile, Alabama, where hospitals are being inundated with COVID patients. Vaughn, I know it's a similar story that we've seen in Florida, and in Texas, tell us the Alabama story.

[13:25:13]

VAUGHN HILLYARD, MSNBC POLITICAL REPORTER: Yes, Chuck. You know this region of the country all too well. From the Florida Panhandle, to here, to Mississippi, to Louisiana, it is this region here in which they're the hottest spots in the country. You're looking in Alabama still vaccination rate of just 35 percent, the lowest in the country and you just saw the trajectory of all of those curves, and they're all going up.

There are now more than 2500 individuals hospitalized here in the state of Alabama, that is double from just two weeks ago. They're averaging more than 4000 cases a day, and 25 deaths a day on average here in the state of Alabama, that is where these hospitals -- they are already exceeding capacity. Essentially, they're trying to build out other units, to ramp up their equipment and their abilities in order to operate on this excess number of COVID. Patients. I want to let you hear from Dr. Michael Chang when I asked him the question of where is this going from here, take a listen.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

DR. MICHAEL CHANG, CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER, MOBILE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA HOSPITALS: We're not expecting things to get any better for a minimum of three to four weeks, if even then. So, we're preparing for what we think is coming, and we'll just have to work our way through it.

HILLYARD: Why do you expect it to not get any better for three or four weeks?

CHANG: Well, because the vaccination rate is just now popping up. You know, if -- it could drop off a little bit if one or two things. Number one, masking and social distancing really, you know, takes a hole down here and the other would be that as the Delta variant runs through the community that it will eventually, you know, sort of, work through what we call the Natural History of the disease.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HILLYARD: And Chuck, the other storyline is the fact that there are hospital staffs that are out of work because of COVID symptoms. That infirmary health hospital here behind in Mobile, there right now today are more than 200 individuals out of work because of COVID-like symptoms, Chuck.

TODD: Vaughn Hillyard in Mobile, Alabama for us Vaughn, thank you.

All right, Dr. Bhadelia, I want to start with a sort of a, when are we going to start to hit our peak? I saw that Missouri is no longer in the red but in the yellow and I feel like Missouri was sort of the canary in the coal mine. We saw them, they sort of, they were first. They're finally -- it looks like their curve is going, you know, starting to round out. What does that tell you? We're looking end of September, early October at best here?

DR. NAHID BHADELIA, INFECTIOUS DISEASE PHYSICIAN: Yes, I think that you know -- Chuck, you and I talked about this, I think because we have such geographically disparate country. You're likely to see rolling peaks from that perspective so you may see Texas and Florida actually continuously increase in their cases because they're still vertical, you know, their cases are still going up.

There are two other things that may change in the fall and that's why it's an unknown for me. One is that our behavior -- our school -- our kids will go to school, more kids will go to school, colleges will start and how will that impact transmission even in, you know, areas that have higher transmission rates? And the other is, it's colder weather and this is a, you know, a respiratory illness is more transmissible during colder weather. And so, we don't know how those two elements will impact, how long we see that but yes, for those states that are at earlier peaks, there's definitely a decline in cases in those areas.

TODD: All right, so we're getting word that they're going to formally recommend the third shot if you've already, assuming you're on Pfizer and Moderna. I really feel for people that got the Johnson and Johnson vaccine because they never seem to provide important information about what do you do if you got that? So, let me ask you, what do you -- what do you tell the Johnson and Johnson vaccine recipient?

BHADELIA: Yes, I -- and I've been speaking out about this as well, Chuck. I think for those Johnson and Johnson recipients who are immunocompromised, I really think that there should be more -- or high risk, there should be more, you know, input from this administration because I would be worried just at least as much for them as I would be for those who got the mRNA vaccine. From that perspective, you know, particularly for those who are high risk, I think that many of us who are immune -- who were dealing with immunocompromised patients, we are asking to come in to see if they can access the third dose, or sorry, a second dose in their case.

The boosters are an interesting scenario for me, you know, so this is coming, Chuck, at the heel of new data that shows that immunity does seem to wane and particularly those who are over 65. As well as data that was updated on Monday show that you know, those who are over 65 and got their second dose in January, they saw effectiveness with the severe disease actually go down as well to 55 percent.

Now, that's not in line with some of the data that we got from Mayo last month that showed in the studying of Delta, you could still, you know, have been protected from severe disease, although you might get a more greater infection.

So, boosters are going to be helpful, I think in people who are high risk because it's going to keep more hospitalizations from occurring in that group. And they potentially could be helpful for everybody because it might help reduce transmissions. If you're getting more breakthrough infections and the vaccinated in some cases could transmit to others, maybe that reduces transmission. But the only thing I'll say is that it doesn't solve two big problems that we have.

One is right now majority of our pandemic is driven by people who chose not to get vaccinated at all, not the third dose, not even getting the first dose.

CHUCK TODD, MSNBC HOST: Right.

BHADELIA: And that sets us further behind in global vaccine equity.

TODD: Right. Does this announcement, though -- because I know that there have been some studies out of Israel that showed this sort of slow erosion in efficacy, I guess is one way to describe it. This seems to make it inevitable that we're staring at a near annual shot in some form, a la the flu shot. Because it appears this doesn't end -- we're not going to get rid of COVID, it's going to be endemic, which means, it sounds like it means annual shots in some form or another, right?

BHADELIA: Yes, and we've seen that with other viral diseases. Right? I think seeing that drop in antibody response, and then also seeing that there are clinically more cases that appear the longer you are from those, it does mean that boosters might be in our future. But there's also another reason, which is that this virus is evolving continuously, and the more it transmits in a (INAUDIBLE) period of time, where there's so much global transmission, we may be looking at future boosters to also potentially address new variants.

And Chuck, this is the thing that worries me because only 16 percent of the world is currently vaccinated. And this transmission continues, it can come back to us potentially in the form of threat of new variants as well.

TODD: Yes. And we're going to have a refugee crisis around the world, we're going to have a million plus people basically nomads looking for a place to find safety and security. And we don't know if they've been vaccinated. So there's just a lot of -- it just shows you, this is going to be a long, hard slog for the world.

Dr. Bhadelia, thank you as always for coming on with your expertise.

Up next, as we await the White House briefing with the National Security adviser, many who still cannot get vaccinated, kids, are caught in the middle over this fight over mask mandates in schools. We're going to head to Austin, Texas, first day of school. The district is having to defy the governor by implementing a mask mandate. The courts, the state courts took the governor's side. How is the school district handling it?

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

TODD: Well, here we are. It's White House press secretary Jen Psaki and this is the National Security adviser Jake Sullivan, we will hear, to be leading the briefing.

JAKE SULLIVAN, NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER: Just an update in terms of the president's engagement today, in engaging with his National Security Team, and then make a few comments broadly on the situation, and then I'll be happy to take your questions.

This morning, the president spoke with his military commanders for an operational briefing on the security at the Hamid Karzai International Airport, commonly known as HKIA. He spoke with Secretary Austin, Chairman Milley, General McKenzie, Admiral Vasely, and myself. The president was briefed that DOD personnel have now secured HKIA. HKIA is open and U.S. military evacuation flights are taking off.

Following this operational briefing with his military commanders, the president and the vice president met by secure video conference with their National Security Team to hear intelligence, security and diplomatic updates on the evolving situation in Afghanistan. They discussed the status of ongoing evacuations of U.S. citizens, SIV applicants and other vulnerable Afghans at risk and how we would do this safely and efficiently, and with a laser focus of the team on monitoring for and preventing any potential terrorist threats at or around HKIA, including from ISIS-K.

They were joined by Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin, Chairman Milley, Director Haines, Director Burns, myself, Ambassador Wilson, Ambassador Khalilzad, General McKenzie, and other senior officials.

[13:35:15]

Just to say a few words about where we come from and where we are, I want to start by saluting our troops and our civilian personnel at the Kabul airport. I want to salute the Defense Department, the intelligence community, the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and especially our country team in Kabul who have been doing incredible work under very trying circumstances.

They have safely and effectively drawn down our embassy compound, and retrograded our diplomatic personnel. They have now secured the airfield and are conducting flights out of the country. They are moving American citizens as well as Afghan nationals and third country nationals. They are facilitating flights for our allies and partners to get citizens and others out of Afghanistan.

These operations will continue in the coming days as we move to evacuate American citizens and Afghan nationals who worked with us along with other vulnerable Afghans. We are engaging diplomatically at the

same time with allies in regional countries and with the United Nations to address the situation in Afghanistan. We are in contact with the Taliban to ensure the safe passage of people to the airport.

We are monitoring for any potential terrorist threats as I just mentioned, including from ISIS-K. We intend to continue these operations over the coming days before completing our drawdown. When you work on any policy issue, domestic policy, foreign policy, any policy issue, the human cost and consequences loom large, and we're all contending with the human costs of these developments.

The images from the past couple of days at the airport have been heartbreaking. But President Biden had to think about the human cost of the alternative path as well, which was to stay in the middle of a civil conflict in Afghanistan. There are those who argue that with 2500 forces, the number of forces in country when President Biden took office, we could have sustained a stable, peaceful Afghanistan.

That is simply wrong. The previous administration drew down from 15,000 troops to 2500 troops, and even at 15,000, the Afghan government forces were losing ground. What has unfolded over the past month has proven decisively that it would have taken a significant American troop presence, multiple times greater than what President Biden was handed to stop a Taliban onslaught. And we would have taken casualties.

American men and women would have been fighting and dying once again in Afghanistan and President Biden was not prepared to send additional forces or ask any American personnel to do that over the period ahead.

There have been questions raised about whether we should have drawn down our embassy and evacuated our Afghan allies earlier. These are reasonable questions. We did dramatically accelerate the SIV process, and move out a substantial number of SIV applicants and their families, but the Afghan government and its supporters, including many of the people now seeking to leave, made a passionate case that we should not conduct a mass evacuation unless we trigger a loss of confidence in the government.

Now our signaling support for the government obviously did not save the government, but this was a considered judgment. When you conclude 20 years of military action in a civil war in another country with the impacts of 20 years of decisions that have piled up, you have to make a lot of hard calls, none with clean outcomes. What you can do is plan for all contingencies. We did that.

The American forces now on the ground at HKIA are there because of contingency planning and drilling we did over the course of months. Preparing for a range of scenarios including dire scenarios. President Biden ordered multiple battalions to be prepositioned in theater and he activated them for deployment before the fall of Kabul. He also put additional battalions on a short string here in the United States. Those battalions have now flown in as well.

Yes, there were chaotic scenes yesterday. But as Admiral Kirby said, even well drawn plans don't survive first contact with reality, and they require adjustments, and we've made those adjustments. We will stay in close touch with our allies and partners in the days ahead as we contend with the immediate need to complete the evacuation mission and as we deal with the broader challenges posed by the new reality in Afghanistan.

And we will remain persistently vigilant against the terrorism threat in Afghanistan and in multiple other theaters across multiple continents. We have proven in other places that we can suppress terrorism without a permanent military presence on the ground and we intend to do exactly that in Afghanistan and with that, I would be happy to take your questions. Yes?

[13:40:07]

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: So I wanted to ask the president yesterday said that the buck stops with him. I want to get an understanding of what did he mean by -- what is he taking ownership of? Not just the decision to leave Afghanistan. But is he taking responsibility for the chaos that happened during the evacuations, where the decisions not to do them sooner? Is he taking responsibility for that and for any bloodshed that may be happening right now? Is he taking responsibility for that?

SULLIVAN: He is taking responsibility for every decision the United States government took with respect to Afghanistan because, as he said, the buck stops with him. I am also taking responsibility, and so are my colleagues, the secretary of State, secretary of Defense, the chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, the directors of our intelligence agencies.

We as a national security team collectively take responsibility for every decision, good decision, every decision that doesn't produce perfect outcomes. That is what responsibility is. Now at the same time, that doesn't change the fact that there are other parties here who are responsible as well, who have taken actions and decisions that help lead us to where we are. So from our perspective, what we have to do now is focus on the task at hand, the mission at hand.

You mentioned chaos at the airport yesterday. At the end of the day, the question is, can we effectively evacuate those people who we intend to evacuate, and that is what we are planning for and executing against, beginning today, where the airport is secure, the flights are going, the people are coming. And we will continue to do that in the days ahead. Yes?

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Yes. What is President Biden's response to the people of Afghanistan who are in the hands of the Taliban terrorists and feel abandoned by the United States, or those in Taiwan and elsewhere that are fearful that the U.S. will abandon them to the aggression of China? And follow-up to that is what is President Biden's response to people in Israel and other countries who might also believe that U.S. will abandon them to terrorists?

SULLIVAN: So to the first question, President Biden and all of us, as I said in my opening comments, are heartbroken by the human consequences that have unfolded, and could continue to unfold in Afghanistan. We believe passionately in human rights and human dignity and we want to work with the international community to advance that wherever we can.

But President Biden was not prepared to have American men and women continue to fight and die in the civil war of another country in order to achieve that. We will use every other tool at our disposal to achieve that, and we will do so day after day, month after month in the period ahead on behalf of the people of Afghanistan.

To your question about allies. We gave 20 years of American blood, treasure, sweat and tears in Afghanistan. We gave them every capacity in terms of training and equipment to stand up and fight for themselves. And at some point it was the time for the United States to say that the Afghan people had to stand up for themselves. We believe that our commitments to our allies and partners are sacrosanct and always have been.

We believe our commitment to Taiwan and to Israel remains as strong as it's ever been. Keep in mind that with respect to Afghanistan, we said back in 2011 that we would be out in 2014. We stayed another seven years, far and above and beyond the commitment that we made more than a decade ago. And the last thing that I would say is that President Biden is laser focused on accomplishing the core national security objectives of the United States. And when it comes to Afghanistan that was getting bin Laden and degrading al Qaeda. We accomplished that and he believes it was time for our troops to come home. Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Just now, Jake, you described a kind of choice that the president -- that was in front of the president, either save the -- you know, save the folks, the allies in Afghanistan, the folks that helped the United States through the last few decades, or sacrifice more American young men. I think the question out there on Capitol Hill and around Washington and elsewhere is, wasn't there another choice? Wasn't there a way you could have ended -- President Biden could have ended the war in the way that he wanted to end the war so that Americans don't sacrifice further lives for this war?

But at the same time, do a better job of either ignoring Ghani's, you know, request to not start evacuations or, you know, figuring some way that we wouldn't end up in a situation where there's masses of people crushing through the airport and the execution of the last four, five, six days that has seemed to just about everybody as not the way a competent administration, not the result that a competent administration, you know, has in the end?

[13:45:15]

So isn't that a false choice? And why couldn't you do both?

SULLIVAN: So, first, what I would say is that we were cleareyed going in when we made this decision that it was possible that the Taliban would end up in control of Afghanistan. We were cleareyed about that. Now as the president said in his remarks yesterday, we did not anticipate that it would happen at this speed, though we were planning for these potential contingencies.

The reason I say that at the outset that we knew it was possible they could take over and that had to be built in to our calculus in making the determination as the president did to draw down our forces is because once the Taliban came into Kabul, we were going to be faced with a situation, no matter if there were still U.S. troops on the ground or no U.S. troops on the ground of dealing with a significant number of people wanting to come to an airport to try to get evacuated.

I'll give you an example. We communicated with American citizens for weeks, telling them to get out of the country. We offered financial assistance for those who wouldn't be able to afford to get on flights themselves. Many chose to stay right until the end. And that was their choice. We now are faced with a circumstance where we have to help evacuate those. That's our responsibility as the U.S. government.

But the point I'm making is that when a civil war comes to an end with an opposing force marching on the capital, there are going to be scenes of chaos, there are going to be lots of people leaving the country. That is

not something that can be fundamentally avoided. And so while it is a point for reasonable debate in my view, as to how to think about the right moment to signal a complete loss of confidence in a government or not, and which is going to lead to more suffering and death or not, the fact is that we made the judgments we made based on the information we had at the time while preparing for the alternative contingency, which was having to flow in these troops to be able to get out folks in a mass evacuation. Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Do you believe that the mission could be completed by August 31st? As a National Security adviser, what do you see the scenario on September 1st? Do you think the Taliban of 2021 are different than 2001? Do you see another situation to Iraq where a new terrorist organization will be born, like ISIS like out of al Qaeda in Iraq, for example?

SULLIVAN: So just on the last point, it is fairly well documented that the Taliban and ISIS-K fight one another, struggle against one another. So I do not foresee a symbiotic relationship there, though these are dynamic scenarios so we will have to see how it plays. We are working day by day to get as many people out. So I'm not going to speculate on the timetable question that you just laid out.

And then finally on what we expect from the Taliban going forward, that is something that will have to be watched and observed over time, whether in fact they are prepared to meet their obligations to the basic human rights and human dignity of people, to the safe passage of people to the airport, to the fair and just treatment of civilians. That is something they're going to have to show.

I come at this with no expectations but only a sense that they will have to prove to the international community who they ultimately are going to end up being. Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Thank you, Jake. Can you tell us what is it exactly, the commitment that you have secured from the Taliban regarding the safe passage of Americans as well as tens of thousands of vulnerable Afghans?

SULLIVAN: The Taliban have informed us that they are prepared to provide the safe passage of civilians to the airport and we intend to hold them to that commitment.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Do you believe them?

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Just for clarity on that, is there some deadline that's been set? Has the Taliban given assurances that this will go until August 31st? Is the deadline before that or after that, for clarity on what you just said?

SULLIVAN: We believe that this can go until the 31st. We are talking to them about what the exact timetable is for how this will all play out. And I don't want to negotiate in public on working out the best modality to get the most people out in the most efficient way possible.

(CROSSTALK)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: I have a question about that. Yesterday, President Biden said that the United States military cannot (INAUDIBLE) where there is no national interest.

[13:50:01]

If the same (INAUDIBLE) will be asked to withdraw troops from its allies including South Korea? What do you (INAUDIBLE)?

SULLIVAN: So the president, as he has said repeatedly, has no intention of drawing down our forces from South Korea or from Europe, where we have sustained troop presences for a very long time, not in the middle of a civil war, but to deal with the potential of an external enemy and to protect our ally against that external enemies. So it is a fundamentally different kind of situation from the one we are presented with in Afghanistan.

(CROSSTALK)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: The president yesterday said the situation in Afghanistan unfolded more quickly than anticipated. You said it yourself just a few moments ago. But numerous officials have told ABC that there were key intelligence assessments warning the Taliban could overwhelm the country and take the capital within weeks. Did the White House disregard that intelligence and push ahead?

SULLIVAN: I'm not actually familiar with the intelligence assessment you're describing, but I also don't want to get into specific intelligence products. And one thing I will not do from this podium or anywhere else is talk about what a different component of the interagency did or didn't do, because from my perspective, we are one team with one mission trying to execute and do so in the best interests of our interests and values. So I will --

(CROSSTALK)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: In the last few days --

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: -- the mission is not complete by August 31st and there are Americans and Afghan allies who remained there, will U.S. troops stay until everyone is out or will they leave?

SULLIVAN: So I'm not going to comment on hypotheticals. What I'm going to do is stay focused on the task at hand which is getting as many people out as rapidly as possible and we will take that day by day.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: So you can't commit to drawing down every American - -

(CROSSTALK)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: There's a large number of Christian missionaries and aid workers that are particularly vulnerable because they're (INAUDIBLE) Christians. Is there any plan to get them to the airport and get them out?

SULLIVAN: We are working with a variety of different types of groups, journalists, aid workers, NGO workers and so forth to help facilitate their departure from the country. Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Talk about these contingency plans, but the president of the United States left the White House on Friday. When did your administration know that another 6,000 troops were going to be needed for this withdrawal?

SULLIVAN: So on Wednesday evening the president convened the principals, this is last Wednesday evening, to discuss the deteriorating situation on the ground in Afghanistan. He posed the question as to whether we had to flow more forces in from the point of view of a contingency to draw down our embassy and to secure evacuation.

Thursday morning he gave the order to begin flowing those forces in. And then as we watched the situation unfold over the course of the coming days, we determined that we would go from step one of that contingency plan which was about 3,000 troops to step two of that contingency plan which is about 6,000 troops.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: You have flown them in. Why did he leave the White House? On Thursday he knew, why did he leave the White House on Friday?

SULLIVAN: The president worked throughout the entire weekend. I was intimately familiar with his working habits over the course of the weekend because I was on the phone with him constantly, Secretary Austin was on the phone with him, Chairman Milley, Secretary Blinken, the team in country. So he was monitoring developments hour by hour throughout that entire time and has been making a series of decisions about troop deployment, giving us direction and guidance about how to take the shape of this mission and make sure that we're executing it and at every turn asking our military who is leading this mission and executing this mission with bravery and valor, what do you need, I will get you anything you need.

He asked that question multiple times every single day. So President Biden has been deeply engaged in this. Yes?

(CROSSTALK)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Jake, sorry. There's a lot of anger in Australia this morning about the way this has played out. We've got citizens and then, of course, so many Afghans who have helped the Australian forces and helping the U.S. mission over the past 20 years. Does the administration accept some responsibility or perhaps what would be your response to those people who are trapped and some are fearing execution because of the exit strategy or perhaps lack of competent exit strategy?

SULLIVAN: We do take some responsibility for our allies and partners in Afghanistan. In fact, as I said in my opening comments, we are working to facilitate flights and have already done so for countries that have lined them up and gotten their citizens to the airport. And we'll be eager to work with Australia to help get out Australian citizens and other individuals who the Australians would like to see get out. Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Jake, what do you say to the next generation of Afghan women and children, young girls who face fundamentally different human rights moving forward?

SULLIVAN: I say that truly, deeply, my heart goes out to Afghan women and girls in the country today under the Taliban.

[13:55:02]

We've seen what they've done before. And that's a very hard thing for any of us to face. But this wasn't a choice just between saving those women and girls and not saving those women and girls. The alternative choice had its own set of human costs and consequences as I said. And those human costs and consequences would have involved a substantial ramp up of American participation in the civil war with more loss of life, more bloodshed, families here in the United States who would be asking a different form of the question you just asked.

These are the choices the president has to make. And it doesn't mean because we don't have forces in that country that we're not going to fight on behalf of women and girls and human rights and human dignity. We are. We do, in many other countries where we don't have active military participation. And we'll do it in Afghanistan, too. And we will attempt to use every measure of tool and influence we have along with our international allies and partners to alleviate the burden that those women and girls will face in the days ahead. We are absolutely resolutely committed to that. Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Do you recognize the Taliban as the legitimate governing power in Afghanistan now?

SULLIVAN: Right now there is a chaotic situation in Kabul, where we don't even have the establishment of a governing authority. So it would be really premature to address that question. Ultimately it's going to be up to the Taliban to show the rest of the world who they are and how they intend to proceed. The track record has not been good, but it's premature to address that question at this point. Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Jake, you said that the Taliban has committed to safe passage to the airport. But our reporting is that they've set up checkpoints outside the airport, people are being beaten and whipped when they try and cross these checkpoints, and that some of the evacuation points are leaving nearly empty as a result. What assurances do you have specifically about these checkpoints and when do you expect them to stop doing those?

SULLIVAN: So two things about that. First, the earliest evacuation flights in any evacuation tend not to have every seat filled because the process of getting any evacuation underway has a through-put issue. So we believe that that is being resolved with each successive flight and we will be putting 300 passengers on your average military cargo plane heading out of the country one after the other, hot on loading and hot off-loading.

Second in terms of people being turned away, by and large what we have found is that people have been able to get to the airport. In fact very large numbers of people have been able to get to the airport and present themselves. There have been instances where we have received reports of people being turned away or pushed back or even beaten. We are taking that up in a channel with the Taliban to try to resolve those issues.

And we are concerned about whether that will continue to unfold in the coming days. As things stand right now, what we are finding is, that we are getting people through the gate, we are getting them lined up and we are getting them on planes. But this is an hour-by-hour issue and it's something we are clear-eyed about and very focused on, holding the Taliban accountable to follow through on its commitment.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Jake?

SULLIVAN: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Jake, thanks so much. You've talked about your confidence in the contingency planning. And I'm wondering if in hindsight, looking at the planning and execution, what this administration would have done differently knowing what it knows now?

SULLIVAN: That's a good question. And it's one that we will conduct an extensive hot wash, as we say. We will take a look at every aspect of this from top to bottom. But sitting here today, I'm spending every hour I have focused on how we execute the mission we have before us, which is getting all of these people out. Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Jake, two questions for you. One, has the president spoken to any other world leaders since Kabul fell to the Taliban?

SULLIVAN: Sorry. He has not yet spoken with any other world leaders. Myself, Secretary Blinken, several other senior members of the team have been engaged on a regular basis with foreign counterparts. And we intend to do so in the coming days. Right now the main issue is an operational issue. It's about how we coordinate with them to help them get their people out. And we are operating through logistical channels and policy channels to try to make that happen. Yes?

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: And Jake, just to follow up on that. You just said that you will conduct a review of what went wrong here on the U.S.'s response. I know you said there are other additional factors like what happened on the ground in Afghanistan that led to this. Will you publicly disclose what went wrong and who misjudged the intelligence here or how quickly the Taliban could take over?

SULLIVAN: So first, I didn't describe that we were doing a, quote, "what went wrong" review. What I said is we'll do a hot wash. We'll look at everything that happened in this entire operation from start to finish in the areas of improvement where we can do better, where we can find holes or weaknesses and plug them as we go forward. And of course we intend after we've had the opportunity to run that analysis to share that with people. Yes?

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Thank you, sir. You've noted that you had encouraged Americans on the ground there to leave and that many chose not to. I just wanted to follow up on that.

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