COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515–6035

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS

February 29, 2016

The Honorable Ashton B. Carter
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am concerned that the Administration may be pursuing secret negotiations over the future of Naval Station Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, as it has acknowledged it did in its pursuit of normalized relations with Havana. Therefore, I request that you provide detailed responses to my questions below regarding your awareness of, or involvement in, any discussions between the United States and Cuba on the future of the naval station.

Recent events and statements by Administration officials suggest that it is reconsidering the future of the naval station. Recently, Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes told reporters that, "I'm sure that [Guantanamo Bay] will be part of the discussion" when President Obama visits Cuba next month. Early last year, news articles reported that the Cuban president and several Cuban diplomats indicated that U.S. abandonment of the naval station was a necessary component of "normalizing" U.S. and Cuban diplomatic relations. In response to questions regarding the naval station's future, Administration officials have given hedged and qualified answers, stating they do not anticipate "significant changes" in its mission "in the near future," that there is no desire to alter its status "at present," and that there were no planned revisions "at this stage." The committee has heard such qualified statements in other contexts as documented in its December 2015 report on the transfer of the Taliban Five. Recent experience demonstrates that such statements do not accurately reflect the Administration's intentions or future actions.

With this background in mind, I ask that you provide detailed responses not later than March 4, 2016, to the following:

1.) Is there any actual or contemplated action, effort, initiative, discussion, or plan by the Executive Branch that would, without Congressional approval:

a. Change the status of Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, including any action, effort, initiative, discussion, or plan that would result in closure of, abandonment of, or placing in caretaker status the naval station;
b. Breach or abrogate any international agreement with Cuba that relates to the naval station or the presence of U.S. forces in Cuba;
c. Stop lease payments to the government of Cuba; or
d. Result in the reduction of U.S. forces stationed at the naval station?

2.) Provide a detailed description of any action, effort, initiative, discussion, or plan.

3.) What is the basis of your knowledge of any such action, effort, initiative, discussion, or plan?

4.) What is the extent to which you or others in your department have been involved in any such action, effort, initiative, discussion, or plan? What is the timeframe encompassing any such involvement?

As commanders of U.S. Southern Command have repeatedly told our committee, the Naval Station Guantanamo Bay is vital to U.S. national security. As a strategically situated deepwater port, the naval station provides an ideal location from which to service, stage, and project U.S. military forces, secure the air and maritime approaches to the United States, undertake counternarcotic efforts, and provide disaster relief. Past Presidents, including John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Carter, have recognized its significance and refused to cede it back to Cuba. For these and other reasons, it is essential that the naval station continue to serve as a viable military base operated by the United States.

I appreciate your assistance in providing timely responses to the committee. Such transparency into this issue enables our committee to conduct more effective oversight of the Administration's policies and plans regarding the Naval Station Guantanamo Bay.

Sincerely,

William M. "Mac" Thornberry
Chairman

cc. The Honorable John Kerry, Secretary of State
Ambassador Susan E. Rice, National Security Advisor

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The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

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Ambassador Susan E. Rice, National Security Advisor

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February 29, 2016

Ambassador Susan E. Rice
National Security Advisor
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Ambassador Rice:

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2.) Provide a detailed description of any action, effort, initiative, discussion, or plan.

3.) What is the basis of your knowledge of any such action, effort, initiative, discussion, or plan?

4.) What is the extent to which you or others in the National Security Council have been involved in any such action, effort, initiative, discussion, or plan? What is the timeframe encompassing any such involvement?

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