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AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN, AND THE FUTURE OF U.S. POLICY IN THE REGION

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you very much for braving the snow. We're very glad to have you here in the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings. I'm Martin Indyk, the director of the program. And we're delighted to have David Gregory here for a second round of *Meet the Press* at Brookings.

David needs no introduction, but I know he likes one, so I'll just mention to you that he first joined NBC News in 1995. He, of course, served as the White House correspondent during the presidency of George W. Bush, where he's renowned for his jokes -- no, his tough questions.

He covered three presidential campaigns, 2000, 2004, 2008. He was appointed the moderator of NBC News *Meet the Press* in December of 2008, and since then, the program has done terrifically under his leadership. Of course, it's way ahead in the ratings, and David, you deserve congratulations for that.

Today we're going to talk about Afghanistan. David will introduce the topic, I just want to introduce the panelists. Bruce Riedel, furthest over, is a senior fellow in the Saban Center at Brookings, an expert on all things relating to the Middle East and South Asia, but particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan. His new book, *Deadly Embrace*, is

just about to be published, which is a primer on the relationship between the United States and Pakistan.

His last book, *The Search for al Qaeda,* was a best seller. He has had a 30-year career in the CIA and then served three presidents in the White House, in the National Security Council as senior director for the Middle East and South Asia. He's also worked as intelligent advisor to the Supreme Commander of NATO, and on and on and on.

Next to him is Vanda Felbab-Brown. Vanda is a fellow in the 21st Century Defense Initiative here at Brookings. She is an expert on all things illicit, but that has taken her to Afghanistan on many occasions, where she has done a great deal of research on the ground and has a very good feel for the ground truth in that country. Her most recent book is *Shooting Up*, which looks at the role of narcotics and counterinsurgency campaigns.

And then our guest is Ambassador Ronald Neumann. Ronald Neumann is the president of the American Academy of Diplomacy. He was formerly our ambassador in Afghanistan. He has also served as deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs when I happened to be the assistant secretary of state, and so he is a close colleague of mine. And we're very grateful to you, Ron, for joining us today.

When I left the State Department, Ron, who was my deputy

at the time, said to me, you know, in this job, you seldom get to start what you finish or finish what you start. And I had occasion to remember those words in thinking about the loss on a Monday evening of a friend in the Brookings family, Richard Holbrooke.

Richard was engaged in his last and most complicated and difficult battle to try to resolve and achieve a political outcome in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Richard was not one to quit the arena in mid fight, so it's particularly untimely that he was taken from us. But I wanted to start this event by honoring his memory, and, of course, the memory of all of those Americans who have given up their life in this difficult and complicated battle in Afghanistan.

David, the floor is yours.

MR. GREGORY: Thank you, Martin, and welcome, everyone. Today this is a particularly fortuitous time to have this get together and to have this discussion, because for a journalist like myself, we've got developing news, and we can just continue to report out what's going on from the administration with regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan and talk about it with a terrific panel, which is something that I like to do every week. And now I get the additional benefit of being able to do it today. So welcome to all of you.

I want to start, Bruce Riedel, you and I have discussed the Afghanistan review. You've had some time to be able to go over the

findings of the administration. And I want to summarize for the audience at the outset what the *New York Times Dispatch* this morning on the review indicates by Helene Cooper.

She writes, “A review of President Obama’s strategy for the war in Afghanistan concludes that American forces can begin withdrawing on schedule in July, despite finding uneven signs of progress in the year since the President announced the deployment of an additional 30,000 troops. That’s according to the summary that’s been made public just today.”

The summary said the United States continues to kill leaders of al Qaeda and diminish its capacity to launch terrorist attacks from the region. It cited some signs that the United States and its allies have halted a reversed end roads by the Taliban and Afghanistan and strengthened the ability of Afghan forces to secure the country, but acknowledged that the gains of fragile could be easily undone unless more progress is made toward hunting down insurgents operating from havens in neighboring Pakistan.

If that is the overview, one, do you agree with it, and what does it tell you about what has or has not been accomplished by this surge?

MR. RIEDEL: I think this is a very modest overview from the administration, modest in terms of their claims of success, and I think

that's just about the right place. Let me put it in a little bit of perspective. Two years ago, when Barack Obama inherited this war in Afghanistan, we were losing. The review that I did for him in February and March of 2009 began by saying we are losing the war in Afghanistan, but it is not yet lost.

I would say that today we are clearly a long, long, long way from what anyone would call something like success. The good news is, we're no longer on the precipice of catastrophic disaster as we were when the President came in, and that's a substantial accomplishment, and the surge is a key to no longer being in that position.

I think the administration points to three successes or modest gains. Gain number one, the al Qaeda core leadership is under more pressure today than they've been at any time since 2001, and that's undoubtedly true. The CIA drones are putting pressure on them like they haven't seen in eight, nine years.

Gain number two is we've arrested the momentum of the Taliban. It's an interesting choice of words. It doesn't say we've reversed it, just that we've arrested it for now. And they're quick to say that's fragile, it could come undone, there are many unknowns about that.

Gain number three is that we've embarked on a strategic dialogue with Pakistan, well, that's mostly form and process. That's pretty hard to spin into much of a success at all. Dialogue is certainly what we need, but so far that dialogue hasn't produced a whole lot in Pakistan that

you could look at in some success.

MR. GREGORY: And, Vanda, let me have you pick up there on the Pakistan piece, because if there is a cautionary piece of this review, it is to say whatever is being accomplished is fragile primarily because there are sanctuaries right across the border where al Qaeda hides, where the Taliban hides, where they run back and forth, and if they're not dealt with, how do we achieve anything approaching success?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Indeed, Pakistan is one of the Achilles' heel of the effort. I would also argue that the second Achilles' heel is corruption and the full quality of governance in Afghanistan, which the review also at least implicitly acknowledges.

Bruce actually pointed out that the review talks about strategy engagement of Pakistan and mainly focuses on the input. Unfortunately, we have not seen much substantial output on part of the Pakistan in military and government.

They still continue to differentiate between Salafi groups that are oriented toward attacking Pakistan, and they have taken those on, and groups that are oriented toward Afghanistan, and they continue to coddle and support those groups, and they have not really made a significant change in their mindset about what kind of resolution they want to see in Afghanistan and continue to support those groups.

And, unfortunately, Washington has not been able to

develop much leverage with Pakistan. We keep offering them aid, including long-term aid, that's meant to support a strategic framework and engagement, that's meant to give Pakistan a sense that it won't be abandoned by the United States again, and yet the delivery that we see is very minimal. At the same time that we try to use more pressure, Pakistan resorts to a policy of suggesting that any pressure will unravel Pakistan and then we back away.

MR. GREGORY: Let me -- there's a couple of issues there, the sanctuary issue, the corruption issue, and that gets into a rather granular level of the challenge there. But I want to keep it on the overall right now. And, Ambassador, I still want you to respond to basic assumptions and basic goals.

I was listening to Secretary of State Clinton on the way over here talk about, look, the goal here that was not being achieved was to dismantle, disrupt and defeat al Qaeda in the region. Can we say that they have achieved that at this point?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: No, not yet. I think it is lovely that you want to keep it on a strategic level. The fragility of Afghanistan is that that's not where success or failure is going to come. It's going to come on execution in a million pieces, which are, of course, highly disruptive when you want to have generalizations. And we are, ourselves, part of this. There is a slightly amusing factor that we treat this analysis as

a sort of dispassionate stand back as though the analysis itself were not part of the policy. As we seek a strategic change in Pakistan, one of the big questions for the Pakistanis is, are we going to stick with this or are we going to bolt and leave them hanging.

So when we emphasis, again, that we're going to start a withdrawal, we'll stay until 2014, but we're going to start leaving in 2011, this leaves a certain element of confusion in the minds of people who are being asked to bet political survival, and in some cases life, on knowing whether we're going to be there. That, to me, is still debility.

I think we have made some progress, as Bruce says. I think you also need to understand, though, when you do a report like this, in fact, on a lot of areas we don't know, you can't tell yet. You can have progress in security, but if you don't get Afghan troops up to the point where they can take it over, it's meaningless. There are thousands of those issues.

So what you have is a dialogue which is driven by Washington's incessant desire to have analysis at a point when, in many cases, the real answer should be, I don't know, and we don't like that.

MR. GREGORY: But I'm sorry, Ambassador, I'm sorry. I mean, that may be fine in diplomatic circles, but the American people deserve to know, 6 in 10 of whom do not support staying in this war, that has gone on longer than the Soviets were there. So it's fine to say that

you can't give bottom-line analysis and this is all part of Washington's demand, and that's a fair point, and I know where you're coming from, but how does the President continue to take this country to war when 60 percent don't think it's worth it and certainly do not apprehend what is the existential threat that is posed by Afghanistan?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Fair enough. I would say first thing, though, the American people deserve honesty above all. Secondly, I think the President has a choice about whether he is going to use the famous bully pulpit to explain and support this war. So far he has chosen to delegate that largely to his cabinet. So if you want to carry a message, he has to take a piece of carrying that.

What I would say you can say at this point is, you have a lot of places where you can point to progress, but you have other places where you can't. So what's going to happen is, when you insist on having this dialogue, and you just explained why you insist on having it, the supporters of the policy will cherry pick progress to defend. The opponents will then cherry pick the things that go wrong to explain why the analysis is rotten, and the American people will stay confused. Now, what have you achieved?

MR. GREGORY: Bruce, maybe a fair question, but it's still where we are and --

MR. RIEDEL: That's true, too.

MR. GREGORY: Secretary Clinton said this morning that she respects the role of the American people, the views of the American people, but she asked Americans to support it in the context of a policy that is keeping them and their families safe. Explain why the American people should believe that we are pursuing a policy that is important to keep our families safe.

MR. RIEDEL: I think this goes to why we're there, why are 100,000 American soldiers, and the reason is self-evident, we all know it, September 11th. If not for 9/11 there wouldn't be one American soldier on the ground in Afghanistan today.

The administration, from the beginning, and they reaffirm it in today's announcement, has kept the goal disrupt, dismantle, defeat al Qaeda and prevent it from being able to use Afghanistan and Pakistan as bases. I think that's the right goal and it's the right way of reminding people why we need to be there.

If we don't continue the drone attacks at an intense pace, we will see al Qaeda regenerate its capabilities and we will see more attacks coming out of the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region.

I think where the administration has had difficulty in explaining to the American people, and here I'm very much in agreement with Ambassador Neumann about better articulation from the President, is the correlation between the al Qaeda threat and the war against the

Taliban and associated partners in Afghanistan. I don't think that that correlation has been made as clearly and as distinctly as it should by the administration. And I agree with Ron here again, I think what we need from the President and what he's going to have to do as war weariness sets in -- and we've gone from 40 percent against the war to 60 percent against the war -- is come out a lot more often in public explaining why he thinks we need to be there, why the threat is still there, why the relationship between the Taliban and al Qaeda is something that disturbs us. If he decides to take the same kind of public affairs approach in the next two years that he's taken for the last two years, I think he's going to lose this war here inside the United States of America.

MR. GREGORY: Right. We have to remember that the success of a policy is going to have to exist against the fact that, you know, in July of 2011 troops begin to come out. And as you get closer to 2014, you have this little thing called the election in 2012 where this will very much be an issue, particularly on the President's left.

Vanda, let's talk a little bit about the other pillar of this relationship and that is the Afghan government. You talked about corruption. There's questions about whether we are trusted to stay. There's also questions about whether the government is trusted to be a partner. Is Hamid Karzai, at this point, a friend, a foe, or something else?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: President Karzai is potentially a part

of each and the question is how we can develop a relationship today with President Karzai so that he is very clearly friend and committed partner. And unfortunately we have seen significant backsliding away from the partnership and friendship.

The Obama administration came in realizing the government significantly deteriorated during the Bush Administration and sought to put pressure on President Karzai to change his ways. That, however, has backfired. And so unfortunately today we are stuck in the worst worlds: President Karzai has not improved the input on policy, has not improved governance, and yet he also distrusts us more than he has ever distrusted us. And this distrust is compounded by the ambiguity about what July 2011 means, how much of a jolt will there be, what 2014 means, to what extent he can rely on some sort of support beyond that.

Fundamentally there is a disjuncture between how Washington and the international community defines governance in terms of public services provided to the population to link the population to the government, to have the population embrace the government, and how President Karzai sees governance which is mainly his ability to preserve his survival, his political survival, but also his physical survival beyond the moment when the troops leave.

MR. GREGORY: And Ambassador, particularly in the south of the country is where you have so much reluctance about trusting the

central government, particularly because you have more disaggregated government that has more local sway and because there's a relationship, is there not, with the Taliban in the South where there's a lot of people who say, look, we may not love the alternative here, but at least we know who we're dealing with there. We really don't know about the central government, how long the U.S. is going to be here. Is it corrupt? Can they actually settle land disputes, marital disputes, all the rest? So there's a question of certainty.

Explain that dynamic in the South and why it matters.

MR. NEUMANN: And you want to stay on a strategic level?

MR. GREGORY: Or now we're going a little deeper. Now we're going deep.

MR. NEUMANN: Sorry, I couldn't resist. The war in the South is interesting -- they're all interesting -- but it's interesting because it's quite different from the war in the East which we used to focus on because that's where the majority of American troops actually still are, but we forgot about that.

In the South you have -- the good news, I think, is that you have a fairly low ideological level. The bad news is you have a lot of people in the fight against us for the kind of reasons you've talked about: resentment of bad governance, tribal frictions, a variety of things. I say that's mixed news because in a sense some of those reasons are ones

you could deal with, at least in theory, more readily than you can if your opponent was entirely ideologically motivated, but it goes back to what Vanda was talking about, it goes back to the need for competent governance.

Now, what you see is this mixed picture. You have a few places where I think you could say that governance has definitely improved. It's probably improved in Helmand under Governor Mangal. It's improved in at least a couple of the districts. In Kandahar you would be pressing, I think, to say governance has greatly improved. It's terribly difficult to generalize about that kind of thing and I don't think you can -- I think you can make progress. I do not know whether we will make progress, but I think you will also make it in some places and not make it in others.

Overall, I would say that from when I left in 2007 to now or when I was back in May of this year, you had more good governors than you did before. But this is a country that has had 30 years of war, destroyed education -- I mean, it has no bench, so that you have a real problem. Quite apart from the political lash-ups, if you pull somebody who's bad, where do you get somebody who's good? That's -- there's a little bit of progress, I can't bet on it.

MR. GREGORY: Bruce, let me bring this back also to the terrorist issue which is so crucial to the overall strategy. I mean, I think the

bottom-line goal here is that you can't have the badlands of Afghanistan again. You can't have a failed state where a mini-terror state can spring up again and attack the United States or our allies. So, if this review asserts that there is enough degradation of al Qaeda in the region, what does that mean in terms of its ability to operate, to then join forces with the Taliban? Sketch that out in terms of what that looks like.

MR. RIEDEL: Sure. I think this is where caution really is important. Every director of Central Intelligence since George Tenant has at one point or another said we've got al Qaeda on the ropes. In several of those cases, we had them on the ropes, but they're very agile and they're very good at regenerating their capability.

The reason they're on the ropes more today than at any time since 2001 is because we're pounding them virtually every day. Our capacity to do that is based on the fact that we are collecting a lot of human intelligence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A lot of the capacity to do that, unfortunately, also depends on having a big footprint in Afghanistan. You're not going to run assets who are willing to take the risk of penetrating al Qaeda or other parts of the terrorist syndicate from long distance. You're going to have to be right there on the battlefield. I think this is another area where the administration would do itself service by linking how the ground force presence in Afghanistan is inherently supportive of the counterterrorist drone missions across the border in

Pakistan.

We had a very dramatic illustration of that just a year ago, December 31, 2009, when al Qaeda turned what we thought was a double agent into a triple agent and sent him back into the CIA's forward operating base in Chapman and killed seven CIA officers. What that episode should tell us all is that we've got to have forward operating bases like Chapman with CIA officers flush up against the Pakistani border protected by American troops if we're going to be able to put pressure on al Qaeda, but I think that that part's been kind of lost in the narrative. We see these as two separate wars: one that's fought from 30,000 feet in the air and another one that's fought on the ground. But, in fact, they really are the same war.

Our capacity to keep putting this pressure on al Qaeda, which I do think we've put them under more pressure today than at any time, but that doesn't mean we're defeating them, we're just pressuring them, is inherently linked to what we're doing in Afghanistan.

MR. NEUMANN: This is, by the way, a really important point because it is what vitiates the argument that you could have a light footprint and a pure counterterrorist strategy. What you do if you do that is to undermine, really, to take away, your capacity to run the counterterrorist strategy at the same time that you actually take away a reason for Afghans to support us. A lot of Afghans still support us being there

because they think we're there to build a country. If you're only there to wage perpetual war, you are not going to see a lot of popular support.

MR. GREGORY: And it is interesting, Vanda, because if you talk about the kind of security bubble that our commander there, General Petraeus, talks about expanding in a kind of oil slick metaphor, and he works in the South, that's contingent upon a ground presence by U.S. forces helping to train Afghan forces, but continues to push the Taliban initially to the periphery of towns and cities and then ultimately -- which is their wont -- to go back across the border where you have perhaps a more robust Pakistan -- Pakistani military presence and then, of course, our drones, who are targeting them.

All of that being the case for some period of time, in this kind of footprint, perhaps up until 2014, but where are the Afghan security forces? What is their ability to be able to carry this on once the United States begins to draw down?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Let me pick up on the first part of your comment and then I'll come to your question, on pushing the Taliban out of the areas that we are seeking to control. Well, we have not seen Pakistan really stepping up and focusing on the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan, and that's a major problem with the policy.

The second problem with the policy, of course, is that the Taliban is moving to other areas of Pakistan. Today the North is more

destabilized than it has been, of Afghanistan. Today the North of Afghanistan is more destabilized than it has ever been. Taliban presence is very strong and the Taliban is very actively mobilizing them. A lot of areas that were formerly thought as reasonably secure are now feeling the heat from the Taliban, perhaps leaving some of the South or choosing to engage in other parts of the country. And that has many repercussions, including how you can actually extend the oil slick; how vulnerable the oil slick is on the presence of forces; that we have there right now, what will happen when we reduce these forces, and do we have enough forces to take on some of the other areas that are exploding?

The North is, of course, especially problematic because it pulls in, in a dramatic way, the ethnic tensions and the possibility that another facet of the conflict will become something like civil war and eventually can explode into full civil war.

Now, to your questions about the readiness of the Afghan security forces, it's a question mark. Clearly the partnering and training, the quality of the Afghan National Army has improved, the numbers are expanding. I would posit that there is far less progress on the quality of police which is, of course, critical, because police is the element of security that links the population with the government and frequently the police are simply seen as thieves. There is more attention and more awareness to this on the part of the international community, but the police

are still far behind and certainly often as problematic an actor as a positive one.

And the third element of the security forces is now focused on the Afghan local police, which was very interestingly emphasized in the summary of the review that was released. These are supposed to be irregular forces pulled from villagers, perhaps given uniforms, and under the control of the Minister of Interior. And our government strongly emphasizes that they are not militias, yet by many (inaudible), they could possibly be seen as militias. And whatever technical gains they can accomplish against the Taliban needs to be weighed against the possibility that that would generate great instability and greatly complicate governance, and squaring the circle of the positive forces and the use of the irregular forces, because we don't have enough forces. And then the necessity of improving governance, otherwise any military gains will not be sustainable, is inherently very difficult.

MR. GREGORY: So, we've touched on some of the big themes, you know, the overall takeaway from the government's review: corruption in Afghanistan, the issue of Pakistan. Bruce Riedel, as the administration continues to tackle this issue, as we get closer into next summer, and as these reviews move forward in concert with General Petraeus, you're in that room, what are the questions that have to be asked if we're going to get to this end game, which when I talked to

General Petraeus in Afghanistan was, an Afghanistan that was “good enough”?

MR. RIEDEL: Let me articulate a little bit better for General Petraeus what I think he means by “good enough” because I think that is the question. Our objective ought to be an Afghanistan with an Afghanistan security apparatus and infrastructure strong enough that it can deal with a hopefully degraded Taliban insurgency without American and NATO combat troops.

What does that mean in practice? That means that over the course of 2011 to 2014 we’re going to see parts of Afghanistan declared “good enough” that the American/NATO forces become backups and the Afghans go first.

The initial parts of this are going to be fairly simple. There are parts of Afghanistan, despite as Vanda has rightly pointed out, the spread of the Taliban -- there are still parts where there is very little Taliban. And these usually are parts where there are no Pashtuns. So, the Shia Hazaristan, there are no Pashtuns there. You can probably declare that a good enough area.

Kabul itself, the capita, hasn’t seen a significant act of Taliban-related violence in several months now and hasn’t really seen the kind of violence that Baghdad, for example, saw. We probably can call Kabul good enough pretty soon.

The harder parts are going to be when we start trying to deal with those residual, long-held Taliban strongholds in the East, like Khost, Paktia, Kunar. And, despite the progress we've made in Kandahar and Helmand, maintaining that success there.

Let me come to one other aspect, though, of the timeline issue. Karzai's government wants something from President Obama next year about after 2014. what's America's long-term strategic commitment to Afghanistan? He got from NATO in Lisbon a commitment from the secretary-general that there will be a NATO Afghan commitment after 2014. But that's not the golden prize that Karzai has in mind. He's looking for some kind of memorandum of understanding that Afghanistan can count on the Americans for a very long time.

What some of Karzai's advisors talk about is Korea and the Korean example. I don't think you have to have a Ph.D. in political science to realize that if we start talking in this country about a commitment to Afghanistan along the verge of our commitment to Korea, there are going to be an awful lot of Americans who are going to say, hey, I'm signing on for this war, but not for a commitment like that. And it raises other questions. Are we going to have a memorandum of understanding? Are we going to have a treaty? Based on our capacity to get treaties through the Senate so far, I wouldn't bet a lot of money on getting a mutual defense treaty between the United States and

Afghanistan passed.

MR. GREGORY: What about permanent air bases, Ambassador? Do you think that's something that would -- now, you raised this point earlier, which I thought was interesting, which is, if we're just there to wage perpetual war, we're not going to be so popular there. The notion of permanent air bases would allow certain covert capability to kind of go in and strike in ways that not be altogether popular.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I don't know that permanent air bases are a terribly rational thing to look for. I mean, if you go to try to have a light footprint without a ground presence, you're right back in the problem Bruce was talking about. Air bases don't solve that for you.

You also have to deal with an issue of the Russians, who are not quite sure they want us there long-term, but they know they don't want the Taliban to win because they don't want this radical semi-extremism exported into Central Asia.

So anything -- when you talk about air bases or something like that, you really need to talk about them as very much a subset of what it is you're trying to do. They're not -- they're a tactic, they're not a strategy.

MR. GREGORY: Vanda, what do -- as best as we can surmise, what is it that Afghans want at the outcome of this war that they consider good enough?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Ron talked about the importance of giving some stake to the Afghan population. And defining the stakes simply or predominantly in anti-al Qaeda operation is important as it is for the U.S. audience is not something that gives much of a grab for the Afghan population. Frankly, they don't see al Qaeda necessarily as a problem for them.

What they want is stability and security. Human security from the absence of military conflict, be it civil war or be it Taliban attacks or, conversely, be it disruption to their life through ISAF operations. They want security from crime, which has become rampant and pervasive in Afghanistan and is frequently perpetrated by government -- Afghan government officials, and they want to see some economic progress that is sustainable that will allow them to provide for their families without being vulnerable to great economic instability.

All of that is, of course, linked to the issue and the very critical theme in Afghanistan of justice. Justice both in the sense of value as a social cohesion mechanism, but justice also in the more operatic sense as the ability to handle disputes, to resolve disputes without the need to resort to war.

And arguably, the provision of justice has been one of the weakest aspects of our policy -- of the state-building policy. The formal Afghan justice system is very inadequate, it is not sufficiently present and

is often deeply corrupt, as are other aspects of governance. And unfortunately, the solution that is often resorted to, traditional justice -- dispute resolution mechanisms -- are frequently very weak and undermined. The Taliban policy has been a systematic one of destroying the traditional village governance systems.

And so it's quite easy, but in practice very difficult to say we will resort to the suras, to the jirgas, to provide justice to fill in the rule of law in governance.

MR. GREGORY: Vanda, let me pick out on this point because the notion that somehow the Taliban is popular as somebody to come back into government would be a stretch. But at the same time, Bruce, there is all of this discussion of reconciliation. And, there is the prospect that ultimately the Taliban becomes part of whatever the government is.

So, what does that look like?

MR. RIEDEL: Well, the theory of the case here is that as we build up the Afghan army and police, and we degrade the Taliban, people can see that those two vectors are going to cross and at some point the Afghan Taliban begins to realize it's not, inevitably, going to win. And perhaps more importantly, their Pakistani patrons -- particularly the ISI, the Pakistani Intelligence Service -- begins to see that this is an asset whose future may be behind it. At that point they may come forward and say

we're interested in a political process. That's the reconciliation theory.

A couple of problems with it. First of all, there's not a lot in the history of the Taliban that suggests that these are reconcilers or negotiators. I've negotiated with the Taliban before 9-11. They're whole concept of give and take and compromise was pretty alien to their world view. Pushed hard enough by ISI, that might change, but it's still an unknown.

Secondly, as we start to talk about reconciliation with the Taliban, those of our traditional allies in Afghanistan, the so-called Northern Alliance -- the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, the Hazaras -- get very, very nervous because what they smell is their interests are being sold out. Worse case, reconciliation can produce civil war as the two sides see us trying to push some kind of compromise on them that they don't want. This is going to require huge delicacy in what we do.

And here, I think, we're going to miss the kind of diplomatic capacity that Richard Holbrook would have been able to bring to something like this. This is the moment when he, probably, would have been called upon the most and his shoes are going to be very hard to fill on this one.

MR. GREGORY: Well, let's pick up on that. There is a void there, Ambassador, and yet, as the President talked today about traveling to Pakistan, where do you see the administration applying yet more

pressure on Pakistan to deal with the sanctuaries and to play the kind of role that they need to play as we envision this transition?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: It's going to be a very complicated process. I guess that's what I say about everything.

MR. GREGORY: Yeah.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: But it's one in which you have to have both pressure and persuasion, both reward and pressure. They're not alternatives. They're tools which you are using both constantly, you know, whether you like the analogy of holding something with a wrench and turning it with a screwdriver or a surgeon working with both hands. You're going to have to be able to do it.

That means it's a policy that's going to be very difficult to talk about. Part of the reality is that the Pakistanis have very good reasons not to trust us, just as we have very good reasons not to trust them. And neither side can really come up with a convincing case why the other should actually trust them.

So, what you're going to have to do, you have to -- that's, you know, I wish it wasn't so. I didn't make it, but that's the diplomatic, if you will, circumstance in which you have to keep elbowing and rewarding. Making it clear that we're not going to bail out quickly and give them an easy run. And that continued support for the radicals is going to be costly to them. But also, that they have an alternative.

I think Bruce has probably worked this area more than I have.

MR. RIEDEL: I just want to jump in one -- I agree with everything Ron has said. There's one other factor here. I'll put it this way: AfPak -- a term I never liked -- got half the problem right. It understood that you can't deal with Afghanistan without dealing with Pakistan. It misses the other half of the problem. You can't deal with Pakistan without dealing with India. And it's that kind of regional diplomacy that has been absent so far.

This is really, really hard to do. The Indians have made it abundantly clear that they don't want to pay the price for our failures and screw-ups in Afghanistan, in their relationship with Pakistan, and particularly not in Kashmir.

The good news, I think, here is that President Obama understands the complexity of this problem and he's spent the last two years putting money in the bank with Prime Minister Singh, and he just had a very successful visit to New Delhi, which I understand they talked about this problem at some considerable length. Putting that money in the bank in the last two years was a smart thing to do. Now he's got to try to capitalize that and get India and Pakistan back to some kind of dialogue that begins to change Pakistan's strategic calculations about where its long-term future is going.

This is really, really hard stuff to do. I mean, you're talking about a diplomatic challenge that is monumental, but we're not going to solve or come to a happy ending in Afghanistan without dealing with Pakistan. And we're not going to get to a happy ending with Pakistan without dealing the issue that motivates Pakistani behavior.

MR. GREGORY: Vonda, there is nevertheless this incredible tension. You have this very delicate process that you've all just talked about: diplomatically delicate; structurally delicate in terms of governance in Afghanistan; trust issues; and, of course, the development of the Afghan force. In other words, there's got to be a series of partners to whom the United States hands the bulk of this off to, including NATO, including Pakistan, including a central government in Afghanistan. And yet, you had the President who spoke at West Point and said we cannot engage in perpetual war.

I mean, this is -- I bring it back to this strategic because this is the bottom line political in this country. We are in an incredibly fragile declining U.S. economy, at a time when we are spending untold amounts of money on this war. The President has said it cannot go on indefinitely. We could be well short of Afghanistan good enough and this President is going to say, well, we're still going to transition out. Where does that ultimately leave the policy, mindful that we know our recent history, which is when we avert our eyes too quickly the region can so quickly backslide?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: That is indeed the crux of the problem. We can have a great strategy as long as it's not resourced well, including with respect to time, it will not be effective. Many a great strategy dies in implementation, part of which, of course, is resources.

So the next big question for Washington will be what will July 2011 look like? How many forces will be drawn down from where? If you draw down a lot of forces in the South, in Helmand, Kandahar, which had the bulk of the search, how vulnerable and fragile is that going to make those areas? And will we lose what we accomplished there? Or will we, in fact, have sufficiently good enough Afghan forces to step in? And will we have good enough governments so that the people are once again not alienated from the Kandahar -- from the government. If we pull out forces from other areas, are we going to very significantly weaken those forces?

You mention NATO as a partner to hand the mission over to. I don't really see that. The U.S. is the leader on ISAF and NATO and, in fact, I would expect that the collapse of support or the weakening of support will be far more radical in Europe and in other ISAF counterparts than in the U.S. So the real partner, the only possible partner to whom to hand it over will be the Afghan government. And it's a big question mark whether we will have a partner that will be able to carry the successes and sustain the successes that we will achieve.

MR. GREGORY: Let's get to some questions now. We'll try

-- let's get to as many questions as we can. We'll try to keep our answers a little briefer up here so we can move around. We have a microphone, so if you'll raise your hand I will call on you and we'll continue the conversation. Sir, in the front?

MR. GAYA: Taha Gaya with the Pakistani-American Leadership Center. My question's for Bruce Riedel and it has to do with the safe havens of Pakistan. When we're talking about the safe havens in Pakistan are we specifically talking about North Waziristan and Balochistan? And if we are, if you could kind of illuminate whether there is or what the U.S. presence in Balochistan is currently, if it's just limited to intelligence or if there's actually some kind of a small troop presence there.

And also, more generally, if you could comment on there seems to be a lot of information coming out, whether it's WikiLeaks or whatever, about -- or even Bob Woodward's book where he's talking about the 3,000 Afghan paramilitary force that might also be operating in Pakistan. If you could kind of clear up some of those supposedly more covert activities. Because, you know, if we're talking about safe havens, how safe are we talking? What kind of concessions is Pakistan making? Obviously the U.S. has called for drone strikes in Balochistan and that's been rejected, but are there other things under the table or undercover going on?

MR. RIEDEL: Well, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you because I don't know whether there are covert forces operating in Balochistan or not. As far as I can tell what we have is small groups of trainers working with the Pakistani army.

But let me answer the broader question. No, this is not about Northern Waziristan and it's not about going into Quetta. The safe haven in Pakistan is Pakistan. If you were to ask me where is Mullah Omar, I'd put my money he's in Karachi, the country's biggest city. If you asked where have significant al Qaeda figures been captured over the last eight years, the answer would be Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Faisalabad -- in other words, the major cities of Pakistan. I think you get lost in the weeds on this very easily by focusing just on Waziristan and other places. The problem is much bigger than that. It is the syndicate of terror that operates in Pakistan today.

MR. GREGORY: Next. Yes, sir?

MR. WILKINS: Winston Wilkins. I'm a student at Johns Hopkins (inaudible). Just kind of a broader question, but the panel referenced our budget situation. How -- obviously there's a couple of areas within the world that are -- could explode at any moment: North Korea, Iran. If the U.S. military was forced to give attention to one of these areas, and given our budget constraints here, what type of impact would that have on the strategy in Afghanistan?

MR. GREGORY: Ambassador, you want to tackle that?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Over a short-term basis you can deal with almost anything, but on a long-term basis it would hurt, obviously. On the other hand, I don't know whether you decide to lose one war because you might have another one you don't have.

We're under strain in a lot of places, including in our entitlements and the whole structure of our federal budget. Solving our military part of the cost is a piece of it. It isn't where the deepest problems in our economy are, so it needs focus, deserves it. But it probably -- if it becomes the sole focus on how you make the economy well, you're actually playing a kind of political game.

MR. GREGORY: It is interesting, though, on the subject of politics. I would ask before we get to the next question, remember that candidate Obama, one of his great strengths in the primaries, of course, was that he was the anti-war candidate on Iraq. And he had the record to prove it, which is to say he didn't have to cast that tough vote. But he came out against the war. So if this is a policy that Americans don't see as working, he's got, frankly, support on the right. You know, a lot of these Tea Party candidates, they don't want to see deadlines and timetables. They want to kind of let it ride. It's what kind of even a primary challenge he gets on the left as somebody who stands up and says, you know, I promise to end this war. So it'd be very interesting.

We had somebody in the back. Yes, sir, back row, bowtie.

MR. KELLER: Hi. Frank Keller from the World Bank. I was just hoping the panelists may be able to sort of clarify two slightly differing perspectives. Bruce mentioned that the Taliban's momentum had been arrested and Vanda mentioned that their influence and their presence was growing in the northern areas of Afghanistan. So I was hoping you could maybe reconcile that point. The point that Vanda made would suggest that perhaps their momentum is continuing and it's continuing to grow or is it just that they've been dislocated from the South or pushed from the South into the northern areas? And is their presence moving westward into Herat as well?

MR. GREGORY: Vanda, do you want to start with that?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Sure. This goes to the difficulties of making an assessment that Ron mentioned. The reality is almost like reading tea leaves and often the perspective of the Afghan population is vastly different from the perspective of ISAF. The baselines that each party sets on achieving progress are often very different. And the level of improvements that the population wants to see is often far deeper than what we call progress.

Nonetheless, I would say that in the South there have been substantial improvements in parts of Helmand; often very fragile, like Marjah where a lot of the initial success slipped away quite quickly; more

substantial in parts like Nawa or Lashkar Gah. And over the past several weeks there has been substantial progress in Kandahar, including in the big districts surrounding Kandahar. I wouldn't say that there is progress in the entire province of Kandahar and there are still parts where the Taliban is substantially strong. The question is how sustainable that will be and how much of that is just the immediate shock to the level of military operations that have been conducted in Kandahar.

At the same time, in other parts of the country we see very active Taliban mobilization activity. Ghazni has gone to almost entire Taliban control, there is very substantial progress. Wardak and Logar, places very close to Kabul, are very strongly dominated or influenced by the Taliban and the North is very fragile. Baghlan and Kunduz are very difficult operating environments right now. And we see even increases in violence in Herat. Herat is tricky because it's not clear to what extent the violence is driven by the Taliban and, to an extent, it is driven by other actors. But the important thing is that even when you have violence driven by either crime or tribal disputes that are not linked necessarily initially to the Taliban, the Taliban is very apt at stepping into these kind of environments, exploiting the instability generated by other sources and using it for its own mobilization.

MR. GREGORY: All right, let me -- Martin, up front here.

MR. INDYK: This is an inside-the-Beltway question for

Bruce and/or Ron. Richard Holbrooke's absence from the scene now, it's no secret that Afghan policy has been highly contentious. We can read about it in Bob Woodward's book. What does it mean that one of the main players in that policy debate is now taken out?

And perhaps Ron might want to answer this, how do you replace him? Should things be restructured? I'm not just talking about who you would find and to name an individual, but basically in terms of the role that he played is there now a need for restructuring the thing or should they simply find a replacement for him as the special representative?

MR. RIEDEL: One immediate area where he will be missed, Richard brought huge determination and energy to the whole question of the civilian surge, which doesn't get a lot of press attention, but is equally vital to success. He really is the person who came up with the idea that it's agriculture, stupid, in Afghanistan, and then got the U.S. Department of Agriculture to get active on the ground out there. So one problem is energy level, and there aren't a lot of Richard Holbrookes around.

I would restructure. As I said earlier, I think AfPak got it half right. What we really need to think about is South Asia or maybe South Central Asia. I would try to find a way to fold this problem back into a kind of traditional bureaucratic approach where we have a holistic approach to South Asia. And I wouldn't do it just in the State Department. I'm of the

view that we need to create a separate United States military command for dealing with South Asia. You can call it SAC-COM or whatever you want to want to call it.

The current way we deal with it, we have one CINC who goes to Pakistan all the time and another CINC who goes to India. And instead of trying to think of them as one problem, our military is completely dysfunctional on this and seeing them as two different problems. That's a little bit of an overstatement. Our CINCs do talk to each other. But the only way, in my judgment, we're going to have a successful diplomacy in this part of the world is if we see it holistically as one integrated region and then start playing all the parts of the billiard table in one overall strategy.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Just a couple of add-ons, no real disagreements. Richard Holbrooke had I think you can say in a way three roles: One was a regional role, one was a role of pushing parts of the U.S. Government to get with the program, and a third was a sort of Snoopy on the doghouse looking over the embassies of Islamabad and Kabul. The third role, I think, was not terribly useful and need not be replicated. There is a huge need for the regional and I would say a larger regional piece, which is keeping all of these NATO parts and allies engaged. There's now, I don't know what, 15, 20 different countries have established, you know, mini-Holbrookes, special representatives as well. So you're going to have a whole structure of which he was the

centerpiece, which you need to replicate. Whether you need to replicate it in that particular role is an open question. And one of the debilities of that is that India refused to be much pushed back against the idea that it was going to be part of the Pakistan problem. So there's an argument for restructuring to get away from the particular debility that it was very difficult for Ambassador Holbrooke to do his job in India.

MR. GREGORY: Let's take one more. Sir?

MR. NAYLOR: Thank you. Chris Naylor, Brookings. I'm the Marine fellow here in foreign policy.

I think it's interesting, David, as you mentioned, that the obviously 2012 election for us I see between 2011 and 2014, with 2014 being the next presidential election in Afghanistan, I think it's interesting we're going to take an enormous amount of time over the next three years and invest in Karzai. Unless the Constitution changes, Karzai's not going to be the next president, so who do we invest in?

MR. GREGORY: This is a critical period, though, over the next couple of years as to whether, you know, this car is going to drive. So you can't just anticipate a different leader without building up some of the foundation.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Let's deal with the reality we've got. There are a couple of realities. One is the United States has an almost perfect reputation of screwing it up when it tries to pick leaders,

you know. From Diem to Chalabi, point at where we have changed and picked well. So, you know, let's start with a certain humility about our capacities.

Secondly, Karzai's the guy we've got. A lot of debilities, not trying to hide those. But we've got the worst of both worlds right now. We continue to raise in his mind a question of whether we are either against him or will try to switch, which drives him back on political support from the very people we want him to fire. This is a kind of political isometric. You know, an isometric's an exercise where you press very hard, don't go anywhere, and get very tired.

And so I think if you want to get more out of Karzai, it's going to have to come through a somewhat painful process of commitment and then a very much more structured, detailed set of things you get out of him.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: And if I can add on it, instead of trying to build up particular politicians, whether they are in Karzai's camp or in the opposition that can take over, we should focus on building up at least the rudimentary aspects of institutions that will perpetuate the policy regardless of who is in the leadership role. We are, to some extent, trying to do that at the local level. I don't think it's efficient at a local level because local officials are fully dependent on appointments from Kabul on budgets and are often as venal and incompetent as the national

counterparts are. But even in our engagement with local officials it tends to be very much engagement-dependent on particular personalities. We should step away from that and think about how we can change the structure of incentive so that officials, in fact, have an interest in providing public goods, in providing the necessary government, rather than immediate short-term power and profit maximization. And we should focus on building up the structure of the institutions of the ministries rather than developing necessarily very close relationships with particular ministers or with the (inaudible) palace.

Now, building that close relationship is inescapable because we don't really engage with institutions. We engage with individuals. But this engagement with individuals needs to be couched within the larger focus on the institutions. Otherwise, we are going to be stuck in the perpetual nightmare of picking politicians or individuals that very quickly turn out problematic.

MR. GREGORY: All right. I'm going to make that the last word. We are out of time. Thank you all very much. Thanks to the panel. We'll see you next time. (Applause)

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