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LEADERS FORUM WITH  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF AFGHANISTAN  
ABDULLAH ABDULLAH

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

## O P E N I N G R E M A R K S

MR. THORNTON: Good afternoon, everyone, if I could call you to order. For those of you who do not know me, I'm John Thornton, the Co-Chairman of the Board of Trustees at Brookings. I am particularly pleased to say a few short remarks about our guests, and if you will indulge me, I'll be a little bit more personal than usual.

When Dick Holbrooke died, there was a memorial service at the Kennedy Center. Bill Clinton was one of the eulogists. Bill Clinton got up and he had his glasses over his nose like this, and he got up and he said, "You know what I loved about Dick Holbrooke? He got things done."

I was sitting in the audience, and I remember thinking to myself, boy, is that the truth about Dick Holbrooke, and boy, is that important in life.

I start there, because a few years earlier, I was in Indonesia at the Asian Society Conference, and Dick Holbrooke was also there. And Holbrooke had come to Indonesia via Afghanistan in order to collect his good friend, Dr. Abdullah. He brought Dr. Abdullah to the conference, and we were there for three or four days together, and spent a lot of time.

Holbrooke introduced Dr. Abdullah by saying two things. Number one, this is the man who knows how to get difficult things done, and number two, this man should be president of the country. He didn't know at that time there was such a role as chief executive. (Laughter)

In any case, coming from Holbrooke as a sign of someone who really knows talent and really knows how to spot somebody who could get difficult things done, I thought that was a particularly appropriate way to welcome you to Brookings. We are very pleased you are here. We, of course, wish you the best in all of your very difficult

endeavors.

I'm going to turn this over to Michael O'Hanlon, who will introduce Dr. Abdullah more formally, and just tell you one thing about Mike, who is nothing if not prolific, not only prolific, but deep and prolific.

For example, with Afghanistan, the work he has done there, he's been to Afghanistan, I think 12 times, in order to do proper research.

There is really nobody better, I think, to introduce Dr. Abdullah than Mike.

#### INTRODUCTION

MR. O'HANLON: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you, John. We are privileged and thrilled, Dr. Abdullah, to have you here. I know we are all looking forward to your remarks, your conversation with Bruce, and then discussion with the audience. That will be forthcoming in just a moment.

Let me just say a couple of words about a man who I think at this moment in history should best be understood as one of the great champions of democracy on the planet. This is more than just some nice fuzzy words for some liberal ideal.

This matters for American security as much as Afghan security, because Dr. Abdullah, as I think you know from his biography, was Foreign Minister in the early days of the post-9/11, post-2001 government.

Then he became in many ways an opposition leader and a reformer, and developed a campaign in which, even though he ran for president, in some ways, he wanted to weaken the office of the presidency, because the initial Constitution that we Americans helped right put so much power into that position that he wanted to have direct elections for governors, he wanted to have more of a parliamentary system, he was already thinking about a reform agenda, creating a reform movement, across

sectarian and ethnic lines, as you know.

He himself is both Tajik and Pashtun, but he prefers to not even think of himself in those terms, but as an Afghan patriot and a reformer.

Throughout this entire period, he was developing an agenda, and a very powerful agenda, that, as you know, attracted a great deal of support. He was far and away the first round leader in last year's polling, for example. Then, after the second round, with all the confusion and uncertainty about what the results really were or should have been, he had a lot of encouragement from many Afghans to protest the outcome when the positions reversed between himself and President Ghani.

For the good of his country, he chose to find a way to create a coalition government, in which he would take the role of Chief Executive, which is, by the way, obviously an extraordinarily important position, because that whole reform agenda still needs to be tackled, and it is going to take a lot of time of both himself and President Ghani to have any chance at it.

We have all heard from our friends in the political science, international relations literature: it is that first peaceful transfer of power in a young democracy that is the most crucial.

I would like to ask you to join me in welcoming the man who, more than anyone else, made sure that first transfer of power in the history of the young Afghan democracy was peaceful and successful, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. (Applause)

#### FEATURED SPEAKER

DR. ABDULLAH: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to thank Brookings Institution, John Thornton, Bruce Riedel, and Michael O'Hanlon for inviting me today and for you to participate here. Thank you for your kind remarks, both of you, and in Indonesia, memories of my friend, the late Ambassador Holbrooke.

Prior to that, we worked together, you might remember, in Mongolia. A little bit of horse riding in white terrain. The deep affection that Ambassador Holbrooke maintained for Afghanistan was unique. Thank you for remembering a good friend of Afghanistan and a good friend of mine. Thank you for your kind words.

There is no doubt two rounds of elections -- both were interesting elections. (Laughter) We opted for what was good for Afghanistan, for our people, and for the future of our country, and at the same time, for our partnership with the United States, a country which has helped us through difficult times and contributed towards our situation and have made sacrifices alongside our people.

Thank you, thank Brookings Institution, thank your people, your Administration, your representatives, those men and women who served in Afghanistan, as a result of which, conditions for millions of Afghans have changed for better.

Afghanistan today, Afghanistan 14 years ago, different places. Millions of people are enjoying their rights and right for education, right for political participation, and living in better conditions because of the services which were rendered to them, which wouldn't have been possible without your support, your taxpayers' money, your generous support, roads, clinics, hospitals, schools, cultural centers, vocational centers, technical support, capacity building, building an Army from scratch.

I remember in 2002 in the first conference in Tokyo, which was the conference for reconstruction of Afghanistan, formation of National Army was an idea, which was started on the side-line of the Tokyo conference. We talked about it, but just as an idea.

Today, we have security forces, which perform their responsibility courageously. Two and a half years ago it was a presence of 140,000 international troops in Afghanistan. Today, it is 12,000 international troops in Afghanistan. A big

change.

Talking about casualties, those achievements of our forces have come with a big price. The number of casualties of our forces, in 2014, according to the latest statistics, is equal to the number of casualties of international troops throughout the past 14 years. That is the price our people expend in defense of human values, rights of the people, men and women of this country, in order to not let Afghanistan to go back to the dark days of Taliban.

Unity government was formed with all the issues being discussed, all the perceptions about the unity government. It is functioning, and it will be an enduring phenomenon. That is based on the need of our people in our country, and we will make it work better with more competence and efficiency.

In the past six months, personally, I was expecting better performance. Nevertheless, the challenges we inherited from previous administration were huge challenges.

The first thing that happened, the people of Afghanistan were and are more hopeful towards the future rather than following the path of confrontation. We opted for working together for the interest of the country. The people received it very well. That was a very good sign for the people.

As far as our partnership with the United States and the international communities, from day one, there was a new spirit, a spirit of thankfulness, a spirit of true, sincere friendship and partnership.

We signed a bilateral security agreement on the first day in office. Our parliament approved it. Then the partnership was revived. In the visit to Washington in the past four days, I would say I can consider it as a milestone in our relations, a foundation of mutual trust and mutual respect.

The full day in Camp David were discussions on a wide range of issues, from security and defense up to human rights, women's rights, education, health, economic development, reconciliation, economic cooperation in the region, regional cooperation. All these things were discussed and substantially discussed.

I consider it quality discussions, which, during my time as Foreign Minister and afterwards, I can say with authority, this was the first time that we had substantial discussions with the key national security team of the Administration in Camp David, and also later on, with the White House, discussions with President Obama and Vice President Biden and the team.

It helped us for revived relations and reset it on the right track for the common interest of both countries, and in yesterday's address by President Ghani to the Joint session of the Congress, those parameters of our vision of self-reliance in the coming decade were outlined.

Also, the spirit of the Afghan people was communicated, which was a spirit of thankfulness, but at the same time, seeking cooperation in order to consolidate the achievements of the past 13 years, which are essential for both countries, for the stabilization of Afghanistan, and for pursuit of a reform agenda, and all that the Afghan people are aspiring towards.

The current visit, I consider it was a necessary step, but at the same time, it turned out to be a sign of substantial progress and change in partnership between both countries.

The fact that President Obama announced flexibility in terms of the portfolio of the forces through 2015, that was something we were very much in need of and very much expected. We are grateful for that. Asking for budget support for our national security forces for 2017, signing of an MOU on economic support, incentivization

of support based on conditions of reform, and discussions that we have had on regional cooperation and reconciliation as well as energy issues, those issues which will help the situation in Afghanistan in the years to come.

The unity government is a new experience for us. Sometimes from outside, it's looked upon as it's not working. I have no doubt, as you can appreciate, in every government, there will be discussions, there will be issues, there will be issues which will be a matter of serious discussions and debate. We are not an exception to that.

At the same time, we have never experienced this. It has always been different in Afghanistan. I can proudly say this is something we have opted for consciously, under the circumstances that the interests of the country required it from us, and we will make it work.

With the assurance that is given to us in regards to the continued commitment from the United States, when we go back to the country, our people will be more hopeful. Those millions of women whose lives have changed for the better, millions of children who are going to schools, or millions of hopeful people who want to see their country live in peace within and without the neighborhood and beyond, and also enjoy the opportunities in Afghanistan, which are for us as well as for the countries around us, to benefit from. It will be good news.

I thank the United States for reiterating its commitment and its support for the people of Afghanistan.

You have the outline of President Ghani's remarks, which provide us with a way forward. I may touch upon a few aspects of what we are up against.

One is the reconciliation. Recently, President Ghani has visited the region and also beyond the region, talking about former President Karzai. He is also in



Australia at the moment, I think, visiting Australia. That's a different subject. (Laughter)

In the neighborhood, we focus on Pakistan. One of the first visits paid to the region was to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and to China, to Azerbaijan. I visited Kazakhstan. I visited India. There have been efforts to open up new opportunities for our relations with the neighboring countries. There is a common challenge we are faced with; that's the challenge of terrorism. Now ISIL arises as a new challenge in that part of the world, and we will also be affected because of it. I will get into some details when the time comes.

Terrorism is a common thread between us and Pakistan. Security is a main challenge in Afghanistan. Taliban related security issues. There are other terrorist groups which have shifted towards Afghanistan as a result of operations on the other side of the line. That is our main challenge.

As I mentioned earlier, our forces have taken up that challenge bravely. The extent of the challenge posed, I can describe it in one sentence, that if a few years ago, it was 130,000 foreign troops and today it is only 12,000 troops, you can imagine how challenging it has been, but in spite of that, the Taliban have not been able to capture any major city or area, but they are still posing a threat.

Yesterday there was a suicidal attack in Kabul, and the day before yesterday on the highway there was a security incident. This is how we are dealing with the situation within Afghanistan.

At the same time, millions of people are hopeful to see a peaceful end to this problem. As representatives of the people, our leadership, President Ghani, all of us, have made efforts in this regard. So far, no negotiation has taken place between our government and Taliban, but contacts have been made in order to facilitate negotiations.

Once negotiations start, does that mean there will be peace immediately

in Afghanistan? The answer unfortunately is no. It will be the start of a process, but this time around, the parameters that we have set for ourselves in terms of negotiations are very clear. Giving up violence, severing links with the terrorist groups, and respecting the Constitution, and fighting for your rights, for your ideas, politically, in the realm of the Afghan Constitution, and preserving the rights of the people, achievements of the past 14 years.

There is no way one can make compromises on the rights of the majority of people in the country, men and women of the country, on their basic rights, under the illusion that you're going to have peace.

These are very clear parameters that the unity government has mandated based upon to continue the efforts in making peace. So far, no negotiation has taken place. There are hopes in this regard amongst the people and there are concerns.

Women of Afghanistan are concerned that their rights might be compromised. That's not anybody's intention. We will make sure women will be represented from the first phases of negotiations to the end. That is our commitment.

In terms of regional cooperation, Afghanistan's location at times in our history, we have suffered because of it. It is time to look at it differently as a sort of a land bridge between South Asia and Central Asia, which can provide connectivity for trade, transit, exchange of goods, energy, and people to people relations.

Some work has started, and some actual work has been done in this regard, but this is the start. There are energy projects, transmission lines, gas pipeline, which was an idea 20 years ago; it was being talked about as an idea. What if gas from Turkmenistan goes through a pipeline from Afghanistan to Pakistan? Later on, actual work started. Now India is also part of that. Recently, there has been progress in the

negotiations in the standing committee that has been established in this regard. We hope that in four to five years time, there will be gas in pipelines, if things go according to the time line.

There is the idea of a transmission line from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. There is the idea of a joint electricity project between Afghanistan and Pakistan that will act as our energy needs.

These are the areas that can create dependency, and apart from the economic opportunities that it creates for the people of our region, that also helps us in the stabilization of the region. At the same time, realistically speaking, we are in the first phases.

Some of them are only ideas. Some of them are actual work underway but needs a lot more work to be done. The future of the country is promising, provided we as the leaders in the unity government and our people together seize the moment. Before the security challenges in other parts of our region affect us, we should deal with the issues within the country so it helps us lay the foundation for stability.

One of the areas that we have serious commitment is in the area of governance, in fighting against corruption. Talking about adherence to the rule of law, you might have seen or heard the news about the brutal treatment of a woman on the streets of Kabul. It was a tragic event. It was a heinous crime committed in daylight by the mob.

That issue has been taken very seriously by the government of Afghanistan. Twenty-two people have been arrested in regards to this incident. Among them are some of the people which were seen in that video.

The government is committed to pursue this issue with intensity, intense care and focus, so those who are the culprits of this heinous crime will be punished in

accordance to the law.

I'm talking about two sides of the story, but the prominent side of the story is the hopes of millions of Afghans, the younger generation, who are aspiring for better lives.

Last night, I was at an event, a reception, arranged by Turquoise Mountain, which is a foundation which was established in Kabul a few years ago. In that project, hundreds of young artisans were working. They are exposing the products, which is from one side, a reminder of the richness of culture in art in our history, but at the same time, it is a good business model in Afghanistan. The main donor is the USAID. Next year in March, the Smithsonian Museum will have an exhibition of the artifacts from Afghanistan.

There are lots of hopeful stories. We are committed to materialize the hopes and aspirations of our people and facilitate for it. Going back to Kabul, there are lots of priorities we have to deal with.

I mentioned the issue of governance and rule of law. Now we have nominated ministers. There are four women, capable women, nominated as ministers, and hopefully they will get approval from the parliament. Appointment of governors, the judiciary. The reform of the electoral system.

Afghanistan will not get back to the point that we were taken during the presidential elections, while the country and the stability of the country and survival of the country was put into question.

It's that important. It's that significant that we have the electoral reforms carried out and parliamentary elections. They will be based on the fair rule and transparency for the people of Afghanistan, so on one side, it strengthens the trust of the people over the democratic process, and from another side, it will pave the way for

further reform, including the reform at the government level, moving from a highly centralized presidential system into taking a step towards a little bit of dissolution of authority, and as you mentioned earlier, even at a time that we were contesting in the presidential elections.

This was an idea that would provide a better place for participation at the national level, better place for accountability, and help efficiency of the government.

Today, the role of Chief Executive. In some countries, I have to explain it. Here, CEO, has a different meaning. A few days ago, I was in India, and I said it's like prime minister. Okay, you are the Prime Minister. No, I'm not the Prime Minister. (Laughter) It is *like* the prime minister. In India, the Prime Minister is a very powerful person, especially the current one, with votes from hundreds of millions of people in that country.

Once that structural reform is carried out, my job will be easier to explain who I am. (Laughter) Or anybody in my position, I'm not reserving this position for myself. It will be easier to explain.

At this stage of introduction, I thought I would suffice with this, and sit here and ask for a cup of tea. (Laughter) Let Bruce Riedel, the right expert on Afghanistan, to answer all the questions, including his own. (Laughter)  
(Applause)

#### QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

MR. RIEDEL: I also want to extend my appreciation for you coming, Dr. Abdullah, and my admiration for your service to your country. As Americans, we are watching your experience in unity government, I think, with a certain degree of envy. (Laughter)

It might be an interesting idea to think about a chief executive officer

working with the president in our country, but I don't see it anywhere on the immediate horizon. (Laughter)

What we are going to do now is I'm going to pose a few questions to Dr. Abdullah, and then, we will open it up to you. When we do open it up, I ask you to please ask a question, identify yourself, and not make a statement.

The visit of yourself and President Ghani, I think, has already transformed the American/Afghan relationship. As someone who has watched this relationship literally since 1979, I think this is the first time that Americans have heard from Afghans the kind of words we have heard in the last several days, and it is deeply appreciated, and I think it will have an impact far off into the future.

I would like to start with the security issue, which you mentioned. You mentioned the casualties Afghan forces are taking, and we appreciate the sacrifice that they are making as well. I'm looking at – we now have less than two years before American forces are supposed to go down to a very small level.

What do you need in the security realm? What are the highest priorities? What are the biggest gaps that we need to fill between now and the end of 2016? What would you identify as the gaps that are most important in the security arena?

DR. ABDULLAH: First of all, with this flexibility to retain the level of troops by nearly 10,000 through 2015, that will help us in the support mission, which is train, advise and assist. That support will enable us to deal with the challenges of Taliban defenses and assist our effort in dealing with the areas which we think are, perhaps, where the terrorists are within the country, and we have to deal with them.

At the same time, there is the issue of enablers, which is air support, medical evacuation, transport, intelligence capabilities, reconnaissance capabilities, and these were part of our discussions in Camp David as well as at the White House, to

speed up on that front.

Also, working in collaboration, in cooperation with us in some aspects of our regional diplomacy. That will also be helpful.

MR. RIEDEL: Did you feel you came away from Camp David and the White House, particularly on the enablers front, this is an issue, for example, that Mike has been writing about now for five years, certain requirements that the American military would never consider going into a battle without, we seem to think the Afghan military can go in and you don't need air power. Are you going to move on this front?

DR. ABDULLAH: Already, things are happening on that front. I will not go into the details of it. What we are asking for is to adapt it as we are moving forward and dealing with the challenges that we face, so speed is something that we are asking for.

MR. RIEDEL: You also mentioned reconciliation, which is an issue that Americans have taken some time coming to appreciate. I would say we went through a first phase where we were against it, a second phase where we wanted to be the reconciliation, leave Afghans out of it. Now, hopefully, a phase where we recognize it has to be an Afghan led and Afghan determined process.

You said there had been contacts but no negotiations. I would appreciate your appraisal of whether you think the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar and Shura are ripe for a reconciliation process at this time? I realize that's an estimate that you have to make, not based on hard data. I would appreciate your estimate.

DR. ABDULLAH: Before we get into the estimate and assessment of the current situation, give me a hint about the signing. (Laughter)

MR. RIEDEL: We would be happy to have the signing ceremony at the Brookings Institution. (Laughter)

DR. ABDULLAH: The answer to your question remains to be tested. There might be groups or there are some indications there are groups amongst the Taliban that want to join the process. There are groups that have talked about it and are still hopeful they can turn the tide militarily.

It ranges. Once it starts, then one will have a better picture. In some parts of the country, the Taliban commanders, they are showing willingness to join, under certain guarantees and circumstances, it has been welcomed.

The Taliban as a whole should feel some pressure. That's my understanding, before they think seriously about negotiations.

MR. RIEDEL: Can you give me some of the things that as outsiders we should look for on this process that might give us an indication that they are feeling that pressure?

Should we anticipate fractures in the Taliban, or is there any milestone that an outside observer can look at and say yes, this looks like it's moving forward, or it's still too hard to tell?

DR. ABDULLAH: At this stage, there are no signs that we can convince ourselves that there is serious consideration on their part. Nevertheless, the people of Afghanistan want it, and we also want to make a difference in this regard, but with clear parameters, which was part of our discussions here as well, the fact that we will be realistic about our expectations.

Also, when it comes to our partners, we will share the situation with our partners, and where we need support, facilitation, we will count on you. That has to be the way forward.

MR. RIEDEL: I think at a minimum, like the transformation this visit is producing, a clear Afghan led effort at reconciliation puts the moral onus and the burden



of proof where it lies, on the Taliban's, to demonstrate their interest.

You mentioned Pakistan in this regard, and obviously Pakistan is a critical player, and both you and President Ghani have been transformative in how you talk about Pakistan as well, from years past.

You have had opportunities to go. You have received them in Kabul, for a lot of nice words, are we again in a position where you can say that you are beginning to see a change in Pakistan's strategy towards Afghanistan, or is it still too soon to come to a conclusion?

DR. ABDULLAH: Certain things have happened. In Pakistan, the state institutions, military installations were attacked by their own Taliban. The school attack, the brutal attack on school children, and certain other developments. There is also a new government, elected government, and new leadership.

What we see is positive messages and recognition of the fact that terrorism is a threat to all of us, and we have to deal with that. It is different from the past. That's why the Afghan government and leadership was encouraged to make further approaches and continue to make those efforts.

When will it be that we will have results on the ground in support of that, those messages, that is yet to be seen.

MR. RIEDEL: Is there a role for Washington in this process? Should we let you and Pakistan deal with it?

DR. ABDULLAH: Washington is already playing a role in it without going into details. At the same time, like any other issue which affects both sides, Afghanistan and the United States, to keep one another apprised of the efforts all the time and evaluate it all the time, and then see what is the role for each side, that will be the way forward.

MR. RIEDEL: Let me turn to your other big neighbor, Iran. The United States and Iran are going through one of the most complex phases in what has been a tortuous and complex relationship for a long time. We are engaged in serious negotiations on nuclear issues. We are kind of co-partners on the war on Iraq. Perhaps on opposite sides on the war on Yemen.

I won't ask you to comment on all that. The U.S./Irani relationship is becoming so complex today. You should always write everything in pencil, because in an hour, you will have to erase it and write something else.

In the Afghan context, in the context of your security situation and your relationship with your neighbor, how would you characterize Afghan/Irani relations and what the Iranians are doing in terms of helping to either enhance security or damage security?

DR. ABDULLAH: I would say we have good relations with Iran. They have maintained a friendship towards Afghanistan in spite of their diverse type of relations with our partners, and Afghanistan has also reciprocated. It's friendly relations altogether. That has been like this throughout the past 14 years. That does not suggest there are not issues in between both countries, but as a whole, normal, friendly relations.

Your question didn't help simplify your relationship. (Laughter) Who should I go to? (Laughter)

MR. RIEDEL: We are fortunate to have so many Iran experts at Brookings, we can actually have one deal with each of these different parts of the U.S./Irani relationship. (Laughter)

DR. ABDULLAH: On certain other issues, for example, on the issues of connectivity between South Asia and Central Asia, should we be able to work together with India, Iran, and Central Asian countries, this is in the interest of all of us, because

that gives us connectivity.

There are certain issues which relates to Pakistan and India. Direct access to water, transport, land, access to water. That will help trade and transit for all of us.

Then the opportunities for investment for all the countries of the region and beyond. TAPI, which I mentioned earlier, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, that is something that will help.

The approach that Afghanistan is undertaking is not to wait for every problem to be solved and then start from somewhere, to try, to see what could be done in the context of today's relations, and then be forward looking, in the hope that tomorrow will be easier than today.

MR. RIEDEL: From the standpoint of that connectivity for Afghanistan, a resolution of the nuclear issue and a lifting of sanctions that would permit more connectivity, is clearly in your national interests, and something that would help Afghanistan?

DR. ABDULLAH: Of course.

MR. RIEDEL: You alluded to him, the Prime Minister of India, one of the larger than life political figures of our day in many ways. One of the challenges of Afghan governance and Afghan foreign policy is always how do you deal with two neighbors who are at each other's throats most of the time.

India has devoted a lot of resources to helping Afghanistan in the last 14 years. That so far has been a positive relationship. Is there room for more growth in the Afghan/Indian relationship?

DR. ABDULLAH: You reminded me of the late King of Afghanistan, King Zahir Shah, who passed away a few years ago. I was Foreign Minister at that time; we

accompanied him returning back to Afghanistan. He was very happy, talking to me. He was a great character, great personality, very dignified person. One day he said the foreign relations of Afghanistan, foreign policy of Afghanistan, this is for our Afghan audience, but I will translate it. I will say it in Farsi, but I will try to translate it into English as well.

(Speaking in Farsi) It is like what we believe on the judgment date that there is a very narrow bridge, and you will fall either this way or that way, but on both sides, you are in trouble. This was a story from a few years ago.

At the same time, as you yourself mentioned, India has helped Afghanistan in many ways, the fifth largest donor. India traditionally is not a donor country, but in regards to Afghanistan, over \$2 billion. Infrastructure, roads, electricity, clinics, schools, agriculture, building our parliament house, in many ways, technical assistance, education.

These are cultural exchanges. India's expectation of Afghanistan or interest in Afghanistan is a little bit simplified in the context of its projection of influence or power, as a preeminent power in our region, is a stable Afghanistan. Afghanistan with a functioning regime, functioning government, preferably democratic, and doesn't allow terrorists, and facilitate connectivity of the region, which is very much in line with what we seek in our own country, regardless of other countries' expectations.

That on top of their generous assistance has created a very solid foundation. Then comes relations between countries regardless of Afghanistan in the context of the regional issues. They have their own challenges. Each country has its own challenges.

One thing about India is it has not looked towards Afghanistan always in its totality from the spectacle of its relations with Pakistan. It's not like that. Vice versa,

sometimes it is a bit different. The prospect of expansion of relations is there, and relations between both countries can only grow further.

MR. RIEDEL: Let me turn to one other issue before opening it up, and that is the question of women's rights. In your opening remarks you took on directly the heinous act that took place. Here's the question I have. In the reconciliation process or in the context of the reconciliation process, there is a pretty big divergence of view between where you stand, where the Afghan government stands, and where the Taliban has traditionally stood.

DR. ABDULLAH: You are not excluding me from the government; yes?

MR. RIEDEL: No. (Laughter)

DR. ABDULLAH: You are considering me part of the government.

MR. RIEDEL: You're the Chief Executive Officer. (Laughter) We have actually copied the Afghan model here at Brookings, where we have now made Martin Indyk the Chief Executive Officer. We are the first to get on the bandwagon behind Afghanistan. Afghanistan, Brookings, and now we will see who else follows. (Laughter)

It seems to me this is a tough line here. You said in your remarks that women will be part of the negotiations process. That won't be an easy fit for the Taliban to reciprocate.

I'd like to just ask you to speak a little bit more about the question of women's rights and the whole process of reconciliation going forward, and how tough that is going to be.

DR. ABDULLAH: Before coming to that, where is Martin Indyk?

MR. RIEDEL: He's out getting money for the Brookings Institution, which he does very well.

DR. ABDULLAH: Not in the Middle East?

MR. RIEDEL: No, in the Middle East. (Laughter)

DR. ABDULLAH: Let me say something which is a joke. A child was asking his mother to have chocolate, and the mother was denying him. There was a melon. The mother was very angry and said, look, shut up or otherwise I will hit the melon on your head, and then the child said I'm asking for a melon. (Laughter) It reminded me of Martin Indyk, where is he?

The role of women and also the concept as a whole, sometimes there is a sort of automatic interpretation of the efforts for reconciliation, but it may require us to make compromise on the fundamental rights of our people, more than half of the population, or in cases, the whole population.

There are, as a result of the sacrifices of the Afghan people, which when I talk about our sacrifices, I refer to your sacrifices as well, there are achievements, which are irreversible. It looks shaky at times, like the incident that took place a few days ago, this gave a different picture.

As a whole, there are things that have changed for the better which will not be reversed and should not be reversed. In a proposition, you go to the negotiating table and you make compromises on behalf of your own people under the illusion that you can have peace. That would not lead us to peace. That will be another disruption in our life.

There is no doubt the differences are as sharp as you can imagine. It's important that regardless of how eager we are to achieve peace we should keep these parameters very clear in our mind and in our actions, so as our expectations from our partners to take it easy on these fundamental issues. It will never make life easier for our people if contrary to whatever we have committed ourselves to for our people. The differences are very sharp.

MR. RIEDEL: I'd like to open it up. I think we have a microphone coming, and if you would please identify yourself briefly.

QUESTIONER: Thanks very much. Dr. Abdullah, I'm Garrett Mitchell. I write the Mitchell Report. I wanted to ask you to imagine we're here a year from today, and your purpose in being here a year from today is to be able to describe with some sense of measurability how you have done as a government, this unity government you talked about.

You referenced key issues like reconciliation and regional relationships and security, et cetera. Other than that sense that you could have that we're doing well and we have made improvements, are there specific ways, specific measurements, that would allow you to say here are some examples that will demonstrate to the world at large that Afghanistan has been able to achieve significant progress with this unity government?

DR. ABDULLAH: Before getting to your specific point, what we inherited as a government from the past, there was a total absence of adherence to the rule of law. Corruption was tolerated. It was not an exception, it was the rule, for every level. What we are saying is the efforts we have made so far is not sufficient, but at the same time, we have made decisions dealing with corruption.

The biggest scandal was the Kabul Bank, which in the first few days, it was addressed, and now hopefully we are in the stage of recovering the money from those who were responsible.

If you take the appointments of the Cabinet, while always there will be political considerations, but the competence and also integrity and credibility of the nominees has been the main thing, rather than just deciding on the basis of political expediency.

Dealing with corruption will require political leadership and certain enabling circumstances and conditions.

In regards to security in our country, I mentioned the relations between Afghanistan and the United States, which as a result of those tensions earlier, we missed a lot of opportunities. Apart from that, the leadership in Afghanistan has taken ownership, the lead, in boosting the morale of our forces.

Also, bringing about changes, with the retirement of some 60 generals, which should have been retired for the past like five/six years ago. They were just there. What we did was the President decided to sign on the retirement letters, so the other levels of leadership can go up and be more hopeful. Those positions were like reserved for those people.

In different sectors, in procurement, in regards to the contracts, which were a main source of corruption in most cases, there have been reviews, and the issues of human rights within our national security forces, the report here was an eye opener to us.

The issue of detention centers. That was never the case that the Cabinet -- now I'm in charge of the Council of Ministers, I am convening the Council of Ministers. The President is convening the Cabinet meetings. The Council of Ministers will be meeting weekly, regular meetings, and Cabinet meetings are regular but not on a set date. The Vice Presidents will also participate, but in the Council of Ministers, it will be the CEO and the Ministers.

A Council of Ministers' meeting agenda was on the issue of how to improve the conditions of detention centers. We have serious challenges there.

Talking about education. It was decided a piece of land should be given to the teachers in different parts of the country. At the beginning, that announcement



was made, but everybody looked at it with suspicion, but now the process has started.

Still I would say perhaps we want to do a lot of things at the same time, but it's better to prioritize it even further, priorities within priorities, identify it and move forward. I'm not drawing a rosy picture. I'm saying the challenges are as big as you can imagine, but there is an opportunity also for the unity government to move forward and to make it work.

QUESTIONER: I'm a student in the United States. Most welcome. The first question is reforms and the Constitution of Afghanistan was a part of the agreement of the national unity government, to break the chain of monopoly power of the president. It was a part of national unity government of Afghanistan in the agreement you signed with President Ghani.

Besides that, there is some ambiguity in our Constitution, for example, in three different articles, they mention they support rule of law, they support human rights, and in another article they say they respect human rights. And other article which says they regulate human rights. As a law student, each word has its own definition. I'm asking does the national unity government decide to bring clarity to these terminologies as well or not?

The second question, President Karzai had more than 22 trips to Pakistan for reconciliation, but he was not successful. How can you say that in the future you and President Ghani will be successful and will create the hope for us to have a peaceful life down there? Thank you, sir.

MR. RIEDEL: Let's get one more question. The gentleman right here.

QUESTIONER: Good afternoon. Joe Cruz. I have a question. You may be aware, even though we live in a highly wired society here, often times it is a challenge to get really good international news.

When you speak of the government entering into possible negotiations with the Taliban, what do you consider the Taliban today? Are they largely disillusioned Afghans, are they foreign fighters, what numbers are we dealing with? Is it a small percentage of the population?

Kind of a follow on to the question you were asked earlier, what do you really see as the one or two most daunting challenges? Is this a conversation centered on ideology, or is this going to be a pragmatic discussion? Thank you.

DR. ABDULLAH: About the amendment to the Constitution, that is part of our agenda. The elections need to take place beforehand, parliamentary elections as well as district council elections, which will not be on time because those reforms are not carried out as of yet.

The Special Commission has been formed. There are some issues in relation to it. When we return back home, we will address those issues. Then those amendments will be made in the Constitution.

The tendency is not to open the Constitution for further amendments at this stage, because that will complicate the issues further. There are some other ambiguities, as well. These are not the examples you were referring to, or not the exceptions. What is our attitude towards this? We stick to the spirit of the Constitution, which is adherence to our international obligations, as well as our commitment to human rights and women's rights.

In regards to efforts which the previous leadership had conducted in regards to relations with Pakistan, I believe there have been efforts at times. There are lessons based on those efforts.

I will not consider it as a sort of waste of time. We have serious challenges. We have serious issues to discuss. Every effort in that regard will be a

worthwhile effort, but in our expectations, we have to be realistic. We shouldn't start on the basis of pessimism or over optimism, and allow ourselves to learn and make an effort to not repeat the mistakes of the past.

In regards to the Taliban, who are they, what percentage of the population, what is their characteristics. They used to be sort of a unified movement in the early years of their emergence, and also after the early years of the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan.

Now, they are divided into the Shura's, and also there are groups called Taliban inside the country, which they may not have institutional organization links with their own leadership. There are groups that have very strong ties to the terrorist groups and organizations, and there are other groups that have very strong ties with the Kremlin gangs and mafia.

There isn't a unified definition of the Taliban, and also when you are talking about negotiations, there are groups, which are stationed in Doha, for example. They are representing a part of the Taliban, not the whole Taliban. For some of them, their foreign links are very strong.

Let's visualize the situation where the Taliban say we are ready to talk and negotiate, but Omar, their leader has not been seen in the past one and a half or two years time. Nobody has seen him.

SPEAKER: More than that.

DR. ABDULLAH: More than that. It doesn't mean he has turned himself into an invisible figure, but something is going on.

The Haqqani network is emerging as an independent, although they have kept the umbrella of Islamic and their links with the terrorist groups are very tight. So, there are these different characteristics and different aspects of the evolution which

has taken place, which has to be taken into account.

MR. RIEDEL: I think we have gotten you some fresh tea. We will let you have a chance at that. Let's take a couple of questions in the back.

QUESTIONER: Thank you very much. Dr. Abdullah, last time you were in D.C., I asked you a question at the Heritage Foundation, and your answer was that even the majority of the Pakistani commissioned officials in the Pakistani Army might be Pashtun or they just have Khan as their last name, but short, are called Punjabi generals.

My question to you is the same, given that the current Pakistani boss, General Sharif, has been in Afghanistan many times, he is really treating Afghanistan like a twin brother, do you have the same answer?

I am asking you the same question, because I have one Karzai Facebook friend and then I have a Karzai friend in Silver Spring. He told me I'm stupid. I said why. He said your Karzai friend in Afghanistan personally oversees the training of the Balochi troublemaker who goes to Pakistan and creates problems in Pakistani Balochistan. Thanks.

DR. ABDULLAH: You're sure it was me, myself, yes? (Laughter)

MR. RIEDEL: Let's take one more question.

QUESTIONER: Rahim Rashidi, Kurdistan TV. What is the difference between al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Taliban for yourself, and I know you are aware of Afghan freedom fighters. What is your opinion about Kurdish forces, Peshmerga, to fight against terrorism? Thank you.

MR. RIEDEL: You can choose which questions you wish to respond to.  
(Laughter)

DR. ABDULLAH: I'm still thinking. (Laughter)

In reference to your question, I'd rather address it in general terms.

There are certain things which have changed in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan, which we cannot ignore. We see opportunity. Afghanistan, it will be a waste if we miss it. Then things have to prove itself in the course of time. That's my attitude.

As far as your friend with the same second name is concerned, I will not interfere between your friends. (Laughter) You choose which one is saying the right thing and judge it on that basis.

al-Qaeda, while ISIS had an ideology, al-Qaeda has an ideology, at the same time, al-Qaeda's main target was anti-American ideas. It was founded on that, by using religious sentiments, but at the same time, it was anti-American and anti-Western ideas.

ISIS is thinking of Islamic -- perhaps that was also in the back of the mind of al-Qaeda people, but they have not gone that far. Now, they are seeking territory. That is different this time than when al-Qaeda started its programs. There are similarities, but there is a very sharp and stark difference as well in this regard.

About Taliban, I've explained it. About Kurdish Peshmerga's defending their own territory, I would say in the face of terrorist threats, every nation and every person and every ethnic group, when the state is not capable of dealing with those threats, then the people will rely on their own resources and on their own basis to defend themselves. The Kurdish Peshmerga's have proved themselves to be an effective force in dealing with ISIS so far.

MR. RIEDEL: We are reaching almost the witching hour. What I am going to do is take two more questions, and then let you answer those and give up any final remarks you would like to make, Dr. Abdullah.

I am struck by your characterization of Mullah Omar. In all the wars that America has fought, I don't think we have ever had an enemy who we really have no idea

whether he's alive, dead, mentally sane or insane, who is so reclusive that it's like fighting, as you said, the invisible man here.

DR. ABDULLAH: About the mental status, I can give you a hint.

(Laughter)

MR. RIEDEL: All right. Two more questions.

QUESTIONER: Congratulations on your new job as CEO. I saw you before at the Cosmos Club about six years ago.

The future relations of Afghanistan and China, could you comment on that?

MR. RIEDEL: Let's get one more, and then we will wrap it up.

QUESTIONER: Hello, Dr. Abdullah. Welcome. I'm a student. My name is Marina. I'm a student at American University. I was hoping you could comment on how the new administration is planning to address the challenges of the opium industry.

DR. ABDULLAH: Opium?

MR. RIEDEL: Opium.

DR. ABDULLAH: On Afghanistan/China relations, as President Ghani put it mildly and modestly one or two days ago in one of his addresses, we are in the middle of populated countries, over three billion population around us, and we are a neighboring country to China.

Just referring to the past relations in the past 13 years, China has been helping us in the reconstruction of the country. And in a recent visit by President Ghani to China, and in my own meetings with Chinese Premiere, that was in Kazakhstan, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting, it has opened a new chapter, I can call it.

China is also concerned about the ATIN in Afghanistan, at the same time, they would like to expand relations in other places. Trade is already taking place in

certain other areas of cooperation. China is also interested in investment in Afghanistan. They have already invested in a copper mine, and Chinese companies have put their names in the bidding for gas and oil in Northern Afghanistan, so there are areas of cooperation and areas of expansion relations.

For Afghanistan, it is how to project its interest in a way with the different players in the region. Rather than Afghanistan becoming sort of a place of contest in a negative way, it becomes a place of contest in the positive aspect. We expect good relations and better relations in times to come.

Opium. This is an area where between Afghanistan and our partners, and dealing with the issue of opium has failed, unfortunately. We were optimistic at the beginning by providing alternative means of livelihood to the farmers and strengthening the law enforcement agencies and dealing with the traffickers, we thought we might be able to deal with this issue.

Unfortunately, it has never left in an environment of insecurity, in the areas in which the Taliban are under control. In the areas where government controls mainly, this problem has been dealt with.

There are provinces of Afghanistan which have brought it to zero, opium cultivation. At the same time, there are areas where the Taliban had some influence or it's not secured, and in those areas, it has developed.

It's a very serious challenge for Afghanistan. It's not just a security challenge. It's a security challenge, law enforcement, it criminalizes the economy. To deal with it at a different level, one is the farmers, which are the ones that are making the least profit from it. The next one is the middle man and the main traffickers. Some arrests have taken place of the big traffickers, big names, one or two have been released, have been able to escape, which are climbing the wall, for example.

It's a complex situation. Afghanistan on its own to claim we will be able to overcome this challenge, it would be an exaggeration. It takes the partner countries to play their role. The precursors are coming from other countries to Afghanistan. The opium is being traded through other countries. All three parts of this has to play its role in order to be able to deal with it.

As a matter of policy, it will not be tolerated by the government, and we will do what we can to deal with it.

MR. RIEDEL: Thank you, Dr. Abdullah. I know your schedule is very busy. I would ask everyone if you could just remain in your seats for a minute so that we can get Dr. Abdullah and his party on their way to their next engagement.

Thank you. Your candor, as always, is refreshing. I said it before. We could do with a unity government in the United States, but thank God we at least have a Chief Executive Officer on the model of Afghanistan.

Thank you again. (Applause)

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