Foreign Policy
at BROOKINGS

RIGHTSIZING EXPECTATIONS: US POLICY OPTIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN

A BROOKINGS INTERVIEW

JOHN ALLEN
VANDA FELBAB-BROWN
TANVI MADAN
MICHAEL O'HANLON
BRUCE RIEDEL

INTERVIEW BY BRUCE JONES
TRANSCRIPT EDITED BY TARUN CHHABRA
AND BRUCE JONES

RIGHTSIZING EXPECTATIONS: US POLICY OPTIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN

*On June 12, 2017, Bruce Jones, director of the Brookings Foreign Policy Program, convened five Brookings experts—**John Allen, Vanda Felbab-Brown, Tanvi Madan, Michael O'Hanlon, and Bruce Riedel**—to discuss the history and future of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The edited transcript below reflects their assessments of evolving U.S. objectives in Afghanistan, progress to date, enduring challenges, regional dynamics, burden-sharing with coalition partners and regional stakeholders, domestic political support for ongoing U.S. commitment, and policy recommendations for U.S. strategy going forward.*

DIRECTOR'S SUMMARY

- *Since the initial U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the United States has sought to prevent un- and under-governed spaces in Afghanistan and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region from serving as platforms for international terrorism. However, the focus of U.S. policy in Afghanistan has evolved from, initially, preventing al-Qaida from planning and executing a near-term, mass-casualty attack on the U.S. homeland to, currently, preventing the Afghan Taliban from undermining the capacity and legitimacy of the Afghan government.*
- *The Afghan Taliban is at its strongest point since 2001, and has derived capacity and resilience from claiming the mantle of Pashtun nationalism, enjoying safe haven in Pakistan, and outperforming the Afghan government and government-aligned power centers in the suppression of predatory crime and provision of other public goods.*
- *A continued U.S. and coalition troop presence in Afghanistan should focus on stabilizing the security environment, alongside critical, complementary efforts to tackle corruption, ethnic and tribal discrimination, and drug trafficking. However, recognizing Afghanistan's current governance capacity, the realistic ambition of U.S. and partner assistance should be for Afghanistan to achieve standards of governance and economic performance on par with similarly situated countries in South and Central Asia.*
- *The United States should intensify pressure on Pakistan to shift its calculus regarding support for the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network.*

- *The United States should seek opportunities for greater coordination with other interested countries beyond the ISAF coalition—such as the Gulf countries, China, and India—that could bear a greater burden in supporting the Afghan government.*
- *Successive U.S. administrations have struggled to articulate the basis for evolving U.S. policy objectives in Afghanistan, and for sustaining a U.S. military presence there. The administration should seek to distinguish its strategy from those pursued by the previous two administrations, and remind the American public that an ongoing partnership with the Afghan government has served U.S. security interests by providing a hub for critical counterterrorism-related intelligence collection and special operations.*

I. EVOLVING OBJECTIVES, ENDURING CHALLENGES

BRUCE JONES: Let's start with some history. Bruce [Riedel], how have the United States' objectives changed since we initially went into Afghanistan in 2001?

BRUCE RIEDEL: We of course initially went into Afghanistan in 2001 because of al-Qaida's September 11th attacks on the United States. In the White House in the fall of 2001, there was a feeling of a clear and present danger—a concern that another mega-attack was imminent, and would come out of the al-Qaida infrastructure in Afghanistan.

Fast-forward eight years, to 2009, and the first months of the Obama administration, which, again thought the al-Qaida threat, now emanating from the other side of the Durand Line in Pakistan, was imminent, clear, and present—and therefore thought that, without drone bases in Afghanistan, we wouldn't have adequate means of dealing with this problem.

Fast-forward to 2017. With the death of Osama bin Laden and the destruction of the al-Qaida infrastructure in Pakistan by the drone war, the threat from al-Qaida core is now significantly degraded. This provides at least the superficial argument that the reason for which the United States originally went into Afghanistan has been obviated; that is, the threat posed by al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan is no longer a clear and present danger to the United States homeland.

This doesn't mean al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula isn't a problem, or that the Nusra Front—or whatever the group calls itself this morning—isn't a problem. But what all of this misses is the fact that, for 16 years we've been fighting a war in Afghanistan against the Afghan Taliban.

Whether we wanted to fight that war or not is largely irrelevant. The Afghan Taliban has decided it wants to fight that war, and its sponsors in Pakistan want to fight that that war. The question is whether we can figure out a way to change the dynamic in the thinking of the Afghan Taliban and their Pakistani sponsors about this war. Is there a formula to disrupt their activities, disrupt their operations? A formula that changes their mindset about the war? That mindset is essentially—whether true or not—"time is on our side, and we are winning." Altering that mindset is, in my view, the single most difficult part of this process.

One of the biggest challenges for two administrations presiding over this war has been persuading the American people that the Afghan Taliban is an enemy that threatens the United States outside of Afghanistan. Both the Bush and Obama administrations both did a pretty bad job of articulating a rationale for our continuing presence in Afghanistan, aside from the original al-Qaida rationale.

And my sense is the al-Qaida rationale is not going to work for President Trump. He might be able to use a terrorism rationale, but he's not going to be able to use the Osama bin Laden, al-Qaida rationale anymore.

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN: I would just add that there is debate as to how closely aligned the Taliban is today with the terrorist groups, and whether the Taliban would once again allow al-Qaida to operate out of a territory it controls. The Taliban also actively battles the Islamic State in Afghanistan, which consists

of several splinter groups and elements expelled from the Taliban. At the same time, the Taliban has not denounced al-Qaida officially and, while al-Qaida has been severely degraded, it has lost none of its zeal to strike Western countries and undermine governments elsewhere.

But U.S. interests in Afghanistan go beyond terrorism. An unstable Afghanistan risks also destabilizing Pakistan and the entire region of Central and South Asia. If Afghanistan is unstable, Pakistan risks becoming deeply destabilized and distracted from tackling its other crises. And from a strategic perceptions standpoint, few areas are as important as Afghanistan. A gradual but steady crumbling of the Kabul government, with a progressively greater accretion of territory and power by the Taliban, would be sufficient to claim victory.

I also believe that U.S. reputation and self-regard—as a country that can be relied upon to honor its commitments—are at stake in Afghanistan. The United States made a pledge to the Afghan people to help them improve their difficult condition and not abandon them once again. To be sure, altruistic concern for the people of Afghanistan is not sufficient for the U.S. to undertake—or to perpetuate—what has turned out to be an immensely costly effort. Nor should the tyranny of sunk costs determine U.S. policy in Afghanistan; as George Kennan once said about Vietnam, the hallmark of a great power is to know when to liquidate unwise commitments. But U.S. engagement in Afghanistan—including the deployment of adequate military force—still advances key U.S. interests.

JOHN ALLEN: The instructions I received in 2011 before assuming command of U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan were to continue two principal missions: first, defeat al-Qaida within that particular theater, and, second, provide sufficient support to the Afghan government to prevent the country from being taken over by the Taliban and again be used as a platform for international terrorism.

The second part of the mission had several elements. One was to, with the 150,000 or so American and allied troops, fight the Taliban to create "white space" that would give the Afghan National Security Forces the opportunity to get on their feet. Another was to build the Afghan forces to a level of competence where they could be moved into the lead for operations as we pulled our own forces back into an advisory role and eventually moved them out of the theater. And the final element was the special operations mission to relentlessly go after the networks: the al-Qaida network, the Taliban facilitation network for al-Qaida, and Taliban leadership, which included the broad umbrella of Taliban elements because the organization is not monolithic; in fact, it's quite fragmented.

The principal threat to Kabul on any given day was the Haqqani network. So it was our intention, working very closely with our intelligence community partners, with the Afghans, and to some extent with the Pakistanis, to attack the Haqqanis at the border and constantly attrit them as they moved toward the capital until such time as we were able to eliminate their threat to Kabul.

So we were really trying to accomplish all of these things simultaneously, but all of these elements flowed from the two principal missions, which were to defeat al-Qaida, and take actions necessary to prevent the collapse of the Afghan government at the hands of the Taliban, and thereby again creating a platform for instability and terrorism against the United States and the West.

BRUCE JONES: Do you see the mission today as substantially different now, or do you see those missions and core elements as remaining essentially the same?

JOHN ALLEN: Well, as you know, the U.S. combat mission ended on December 31, 2014. That was not the recommendation of commanders. My own recommendation before I departed was that we keep 20,000 U.S. and NATO partner troops to maintain a "pervasive touch"—meaning, remain in contact as widely as possible with the Afghan troops around the country in order to sustain their commitment and training, and, in general, facilitate an upward spiral of professionalism and professionalization instead of a downward spiral.

BRUCE JONES: We often talk about the U.S. role in the conflict in Afghanistan as the longest-running war in American history. However, on the one hand, the combat mission ended in 2014. On the other hand, it's

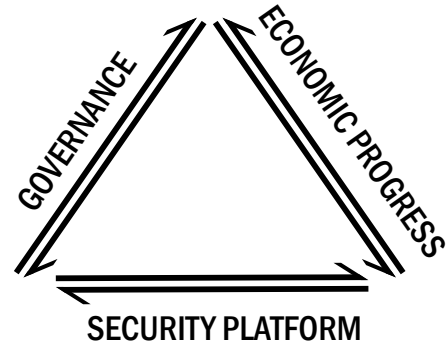
also not like our long-term presence in the Korean Peninsula—about 30,000 troops since the 1950s—that provides reassurance and deterrence. Does the ongoing U.S. presence in Afghanistan represent a sort of third category of long-term, semi-operational, semi-deterrent, semi-nation-building mission that, in the future, we could have in a number of countries over a very long period of time?

JOHN ALLEN: We understood this. We fully anticipated a long-term follow-on mission to the NATO mission and to Operation Enduring Freedom, which is now called Operation Resolute Support, where we would see allied troops in Afghanistan in primarily a training, advisory, and professionalization role for an additional 10 to 20 years.

We fully anticipated—and recommended—such a long-term presence because going from 150,000 to 8,500 troops in the space of less than 40 months is a waterfall, the effects of which simply can't be sustained. There's a certain triangular relationship in Afghanistan that you have to understand. The base of the triangle is the security platform upon which the other two converging legs—effective governance and viable economic progress—become possible.

Without a secure environment, you can neither govern the country nor have a viable economy, which is emerging from 16 years of distortion from a wartime environment. The size and duration of troop presence has to be long enough to not only provide for the security environment, but also to allow those other two legs of the triangle to become viable. We simply can't look at the situation in Afghanistan solely through the lens of the numbers of troops we have there. That's only part of the story.

TANVI MADAN: There is a question of whether the goal is to prevent the collapse of the government, or to actually build it up into something stronger. Each objective would suggest very different approaches. Over time, successive administrations have had various views on this question—or each administration has had multiple views—and this, in turn, has affected everything else, including not just how the Afghans, but also how all the regional powers in the neighborhood, have seen the U.S. approach.



MICHAEL O'HANLON: I agree, but I also think the emphasis on governance, or state-building, has been very much a function of producing or maintaining the minimum security requirements. If you look at the early years after the overthrow of the Taliban—the so-called "light footprint" period—the real goal there was just to make sure that the remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaida were dealt with. And there was very little else happening. There were various efforts by Germany, Italy, or other countries to each take one ministry and build it up, but the amount of effort was minimal, and people blamed this approach on President Bush's preoccupation with Iraq. That's part of the answer, but the Europeans weren't really focused on state-building either.

As time went by, and you get into 2006-07, the Taliban is coming back, and, all of a sudden, even the most minimally-defined mission focused on security needed to expand its scope and capabilities. As we saw leading up to General Stan McChrystal's 2009 review of the war effort, corruption was seen as the second, equal threat to the state and the government's ability to hold on to power. So improving governance was seen not as some starry-eyed goal—of, you know, wouldn't it be nice to do—but instead as essential to preserve the security gains and prevent the return of the Taliban.

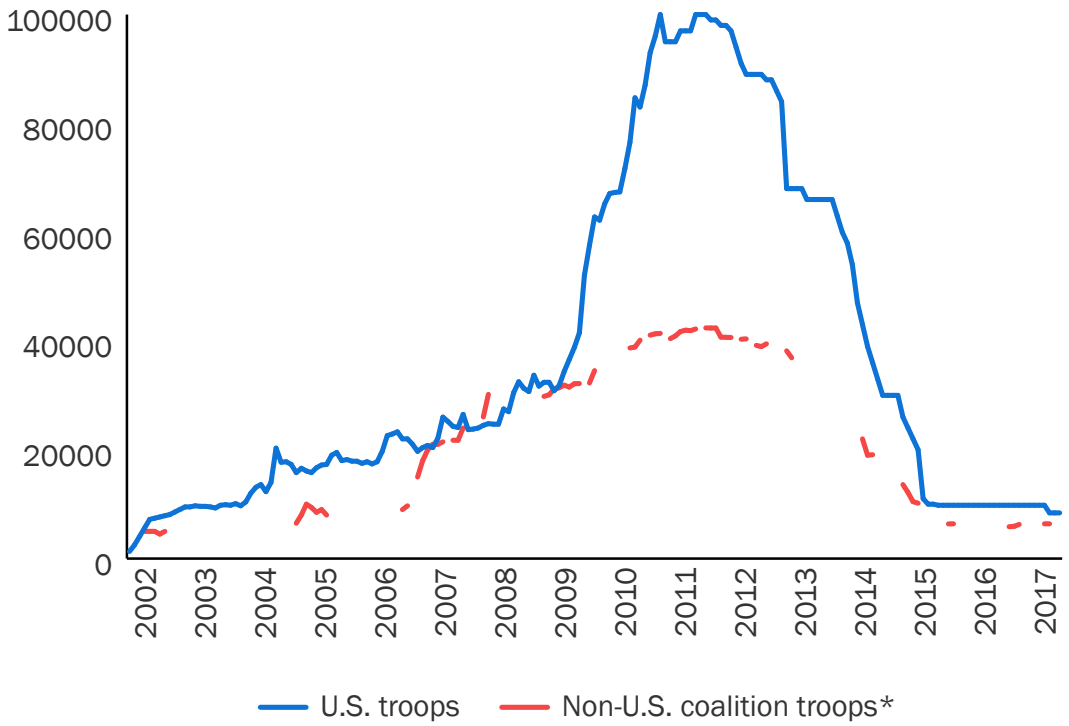
For a time in that 2009-10 period, there were some people who had high aspirations for creating a strong Afghan state, but they were really very few and it was for a very short time. Then, by the time General Allen was in command and thereafter, it became increasingly hard to deal with President Karzai, increasingly clear that all you are doing is trying to control the degree of predatory state behavior and keep the patronage system in check. There was less and less hope that you could really remake the Afghan state, and today I don't really know anybody who speaks in those terms.

So, I agree with Tanvi that the strong and weak objectives, loftier and more pragmatic goals, have been there, but the thinking about state-building has always been very derivative and supplemental to the security mission: making sure we meet the minimum requirement of keeping the Taliban from regaining power and bringing back all of its friends.

BRUCE JONES: Yes, it always struck me during this debate that we weren't talking in the correct timeframes—the kind of timeframes John Allen described: 15 to 20 years. These are the minimum kinds of timeframes in which you could actually make a real difference in terms of governance, the economy, and security sector effectiveness, whereas the U.S. military at the time seemed to be talking about timeframes of 18 months. There's no experience in history that suggests that, in anything less than a decade can you meaningfully improve the quality of governance, even in places with a more sophisticated baseline than Afghanistan.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: As a quick footnote to that point, going back to the famous disagreement between U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry and General McChrystal, there was a fair amount to be said for Eikenberry's caution even though I was on the McChrystal side of the debate at the time, advocating for a big surge. Because the real timeframes are much longer than the debate at the time suggested, there was something to be said for "going medium" over a longer period of time, instead of going from light to really big, and hoping you could somehow accomplish the mission quickly. Because afterward, of course, when General Allen was in command, he was asked to downsize the force almost as quickly as it had been built up. The speed of the surge and subsequent drawdown wasn't compatible with realistic expectations.

Figure 1: U.S. and coalition troops deployed in Afghanistan, 2001-17



Source: Ian Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, "Afghanistan Index" (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2017) https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/21csi_20170525_afghanistan_index.pdf.

*NATO has not consistently released monthly figures on non-U.S. coalition troops.

JOHN ALLEN: Yes, the initial objective of the administration was that General Petraeus was going to be returning troops from the surge even before those final troops completed the surge timetable. I signed the paperwork to send back 10,000 troops the day I took command, and then my number-one objective, besides defeating the Taliban, was getting the other 23,000 out of the theater by September 30, 2012.

TANVI MADAN: That raises the U.S. domestic political aspect of setting these timeframes in terms of public expectations. The questions of whether you think the administration was reacting to public opinion about U.S. interventions abroad, and whether in the public mind the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were conflated. The last administration arguably set a withdrawal deadline—which set off a whole chain reaction of events in Afghanistan and the region—out of a sense of what the public wanted.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Do you think the American public was as impatient as President Obama claimed or seemed to believe?

TANVI MADAN: This raises the broader question about whether presidents shape public perceptions, or whether they are largely reactive. It's hard to know what the public expected and in what timeframe. But clearly President Obama did run—as many challengers do, of course—in opposition to his predecessor's policy, including on the wars, and won. If there's a decision by the current administration to send additional troops—departing from what President Trump's rhetoric suggested in the campaign—there will have to be some explanation to the public for why, and an effort to remind the American public of why this is still important.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Bruce Riedel should weigh in here, but my recollection is that the Obama review of the war in Afghanistan was informed by his insistence that he wanted to fight the right wars and avoid the stupid wars, and that Afghanistan was the right one. Correct?

BRUCE RIEDEL: Yes, very much so. President Obama's thinking might have been more that there were bad wars, and there were worse wars. But I want to underscore Tanvi's point about domestic support. If you go back to 2001, defeating al-Qaida in Afghanistan was genuinely seen as essential and imperative. President George W. Bush made that point very well in 2001, and Barack Obama could still make it in 2009.

It's much harder to make that point in 2017. The Trump administration is going to have to explain why we are staying there, not in terms of the original reason we went in, but in terms of what has always been a kind of secondary mission—important and costly as that mission is today—that was never the prime reason we were there. As much as I hesitate to use the phrase, we can say "mission accomplished" with respect to the prime reason we were there. But now we are dealing with a much more difficult problem, which is how we stabilize Afghanistan long-term, including in the face of a much stronger neighbor—Pakistan—that doesn't want to stabilize Afghanistan on the same basis that we do. Pakistan—or, to put it differently—the people who run Pakistan's Afghan policy would want to stabilize Afghanistan with the Taliban largely in control as a Pakistani client. That's antithetical to us.

I believe we need to take a much stronger attitude toward Pakistan. But I would be the first to recognize that, if we do, the president is going to have to articulate an Afghanistan policy that is not just more of the same. It's going to require a pretty big shift, and whether this administration is interested in and capable of doing that, given political realities, is an open question.

BRUCE JONES: Yes, even more than Obama, Trump campaigned on questioning why we are spending money on nation-building over there, instead of nation-building at home. So, to the extent that the mission in Afghanistan moves away from an immediate, clear, and present danger, and instead toward a more sustained effort to strengthen the Afghan state, the knot seems very hard to untangle. This to me raises the question of whether U.S. administrations need to articulate more clearly the case for missions that are not quite war, but nevertheless require long-term military engagement. But I want to dive deeper on a couple of things before we turn to U.S. strategy going forward.

First and most important: Why is the Taliban as resilient as it is? Is it all about Pakistani support? Is it about confusion surrounding U.S. objectives? What in your minds are the sources of Taliban resilience? Second, and on the flip side, what are the endemic sources of weakness for the Afghan state?

BRUCE RIEDEL: The Afghan Taliban is very resilient for many reasons, one of which is that they represent the aspirations in the Pashtun community—not all of the Pashtun community, but a significant portion of

it. They also have successfully portrayed themselves as fighting against foreign interference—in particular, non-Muslim interference; this is why one of the problems of our allied force posture in Afghanistan is that there are always too many Christians and not enough Muslims, and it's unlikely we are going to be able to fix that problem any time in the future. So the Taliban's appeals to deeply-rooted Pashtun interests, to nationalism, and to Islamic values all at once, are an important part of their resilience.

But in my view, none of this would be as dangerous as it is if the Taliban didn't have safe haven and sanctuary in Pakistan—and confidence that, no matter what we do to them in Afghanistan, they can reconstitute. It's not just the Pakistani intelligence services; there is a sizeable part of the Islamic clerical establishment in Pakistan that is openly supportive of the Afghan Taliban, and sees the conflict as a righteous and holy war, and therefore facilitates fundraising in Pakistan, and even more fundraising in Dubai. While I think there's a lot of fundraising in Saudi Arabia, Dubai seems to be at the heart of it.

So if these are the sources of the Afghan Taliban's resilience, then we have to ask ourselves what among those things we can fundamentally change. We are not going to change Pashtun identity—not in 10 years, not in 20 years, not in 200 years.

JOHN ALLEN: Not ever.

BRUCE RIEDEL: Not ever. We are not going to change the sense that we are foreigners in an Islamic country. What we can perhaps change are the sanctuaries and safe havens, although that's a very, very hard thing to do. On the other hand, the weaknesses of the Afghan state are unfortunately legion. So I tend to say, let's not try to build an Afghan state that we think will somehow be fundamentally superior to Kyrgyzstan or Pakistan. We are not trying to build Switzerland; we don't want Afghanistan to be a candidate for the European Union. We want it to be as stable and effective as its fellow governments in South and Central Asia.

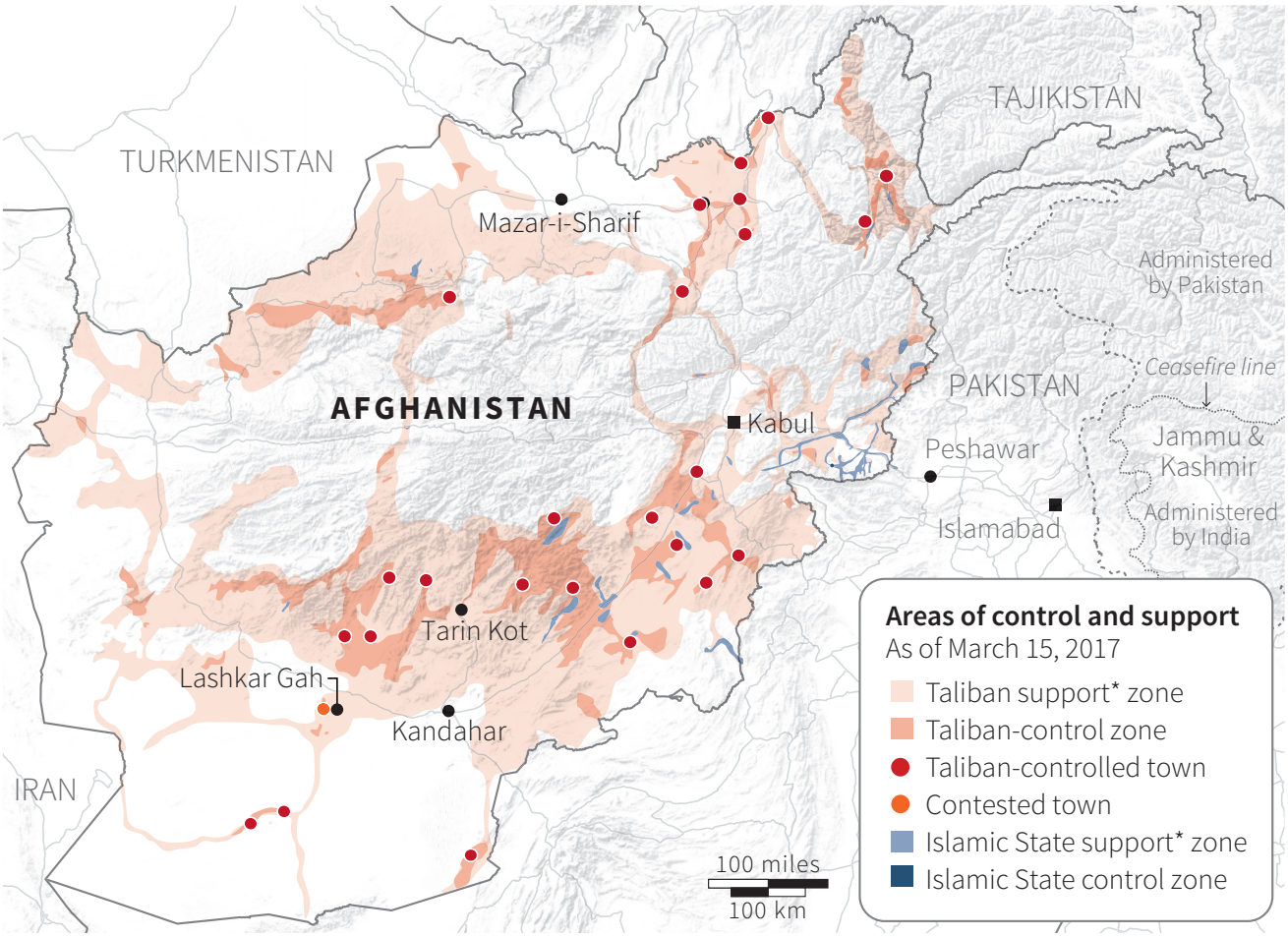
BRUCE JONES: And even by that standard it's a very weak state.

BRUCE RIEDEL: It is. But that's the bar against which we should measure them—not some chimera. We are not going to end corruption in Afghanistan. The state of Maryland and the District of Columbia are suing our own president for corruption. It's unrealistic. And it's not that corruption isn't important; Vanda will eloquently explain why anti-corruption efforts are so important. They are. But it's unrealistic to think that, even if we're there for 20 more years, we're going to foster a corruption-free Afghan state, eliminate the narcotics trade, or eliminate nepotism in the Afghan military. If you start making those your stated goals, you are bound to have many Americans—including, I think, the president—telling you that you're out of your mind.

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN: On corruption and governance, I'd add that the National Unity Government (NUG) that was created in the wake of the highly contested presidential elections of 2014 has not yet really found its feet. Its weakness, political dependencies, entanglements, and other priorities have also limited and undermined its willingness and ability to robustly tackle predatory criminality, illicit economies, and organized crime—all of which have become intermeshed with Afghanistan's political system as well as international counterinsurgency operations. Afghanistan's illicit economies such as illegal mining and logging and drug trafficking have financed and stimulated some aspects of the post-2001 violent conflict. But it is particularly the predatory criminality—involving usurpation of land, taxes, and customs, generalized extortion, thuggish monopolistic domination of international contracts and local economic markets, and usurpation of international aid—that has even more severely undermined the stabilization and reconstruction efforts. The state's presence, though meager, often has been characterized by rapaciousness, nepotism, corruption, tribal discrimination, and predatory behavior from government officials and powerbrokers closely aligned with the state. This allows the Taliban, despite its brutality, to present itself as a more predictable and less corrupt ruler.

So the Taliban's resilience and growing capacity comes from outperforming the government and government-aligned powerbrokers on the ground—in delivery of governance and in the suppression of predatory crime. And, though hardly free of problems, constraints, and limitations, the Taliban is at its strongest point since 2001.

Figure 2: Map of Taliban and Islamic State control in Afghanistan



* Includes low-confidence support zone based on historical, terrain, and demographic analysis.
Sources: Institute for the Study of War; Reuters

Staff, 24/03/2017 REUTERS

BRUCE JONES: All of this ultimately puts you in this incredibly difficult political space where you are trying to convince the American public that it's a good idea to sustain a troop level of some 10,000-20,000 troops in a country to, over the course of decades, just make it a little bit less corrupt, a little less rights-abusing, and a little less gender intolerant. How do you marshal a compelling argument, a political argument, about why we are there, given those bleak realities? And in that context, how do you evaluate President Trump's decision to delegate authority to the Pentagon to determine troop levels?

MICHAEL O'HANLON: I support giving commanders this flexibility, within the contours of an overall strategy that has been previously debated and decided by a White House-coordinated effort. But major strategic decisions and changes should still involve a broader cast of characters than those at the Pentagon.

JOHN ALLEN: Yes, I'm comfortable with the president delegating to the secretary of defense the specific numbers, but only given a thorough brief to the president and an explanation by the secretary of defense that he believes he can accomplish his objectives with a certain range of troops, the specific numbers of which the president leaves to the secretary to determine, so long as he stays within that agreed range of troop levels.

My assumption is—knowing Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis—that Mattis made the case to the president that his best estimate is that he needs 3,000-5,000 troops to train, advise, and support Afghan forces

in stabilizing Afghanistan. If the president concurs with the numbers as well as the secretary and the commanders' concept of employment, he can leave the secretary the discretion to deploy the exact number, without breaking the troop cap, rather than constantly going back for permission. This vastly increases the momentum that the allies and Afghan forces can sustain.

Now, it also places the onus for getting this right on the secretary of defense. My guess would be that, after being given this discretion, if the secretary subsequently believed there was a need for more troops, the next conversation would be somewhat more difficult. But I reject some concerns that, in granting this discretion, the president is setting the conditions for blaming the secretary and the commanders for any failure. In the end, the president is commander-in-chief and cannot escape the responsibility for the outcome, good or bad.

BRUCE RIEDEL: I'm troubled by the president's decision to delegate authority to the Pentagon because I suspect that the White House is trying to avoid responsibility for the war. That is irresponsible. The president should not micromanage the battlefield but he has to sell the campaign at home—not walk away from it.

Regarding the other question about marshalling a compelling argument, there is another point, which is that, in 2002, less than 1 million Afghans—and boys only—were in school. In 2017, the figure is about 9 million, of which 40 percent are girls. Enrollment in Afghanistan's universities has gone from about 8,000 to 175,000. If you want to think of something that we've done in Afghanistan that is going to change Afghanistan long-term in a positive way, it's supporting education for the Afghan people. President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush did a very good job articulating that message. President Obama seemed more reluctant to embrace that message.

Figure 3: Development indicators in Afghanistan, 2001-17

	LIFE EXPECTANCY	LITERACY	PRIMARY SCHOOL ENROLLMENT (GIRLS)	ELECTRICITY ACCESS	IMPROVED WATER ACCESS	GDP PER CAPITA
2001	55.5 YEARS	28%*	0%	1%	32%	$120
2015	60.7 YEARS	38%	91%	90%**	55%	$594

Source: "World Bank Open Data," World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/.

*Data from 2000. Source: UNESCO, "EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007," (Paris: U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2007), http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001477/147794e.pdf.

**Data from 2014.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: With respect to reducing corruption, one of the reasons I was troubled by skipping a step in the downsizing of U.S. and allied forces is that, as I understand it, what General Allen wanted as commander was to have enough troops out in the field with Afghans as they were starting to take charge of the fight. That meant that, as you are trying to fight corruption, fight nepotism—and I agree that you can't aspire to do it completely—you didn't have enough eyes and ears on what's happening at the tactical level. You want those eyes and ears so that when the really corrupt or abusive commanders are there, you can credibly go to the Afghan government and say, "you've got to replace this person." Then you need

another year or two to try to work with the successor, and hopefully that one is better, and your chances are probably 50/50 he will be. And then if that person is still bad, you need a chance to try again. Yes, you can't do it forever, you can't do it indefinitely, but you need enough years where you can get some substantial percentage of the Afghan military and policy leadership to care more about the country than the dividends of corruption. They can care about both, but they can't care only about their own pockets. If you skip the step of being out in the field with them, and you go straight to only the central training and advising role, you no longer have those eyes and ears, and you no longer have the credibility to help the Afghan leadership make critical reforms.

So it doesn't have to become a perfect place, but you need commanders who are at least moderately competent. And I think we deprived ourselves of some of the leverage and ability to do that.

JOHN ALLEN: You could not be more right, Mike. The point about maintaining a "pervasive touch" through the troop level and time commitment we recommended was to be able to sustain Afghan forces in terms of morale, training, and professionalization. We used to say that, particularly in a firefight, the presence of foreign advisors was often the steel rod of the backbone of Afghan forces. The more we lift up off of those units and leave them to themselves, often logistically isolated and without our professional presence, the more quickly they'll begin to retreat into their combat outposts, and not patrol, et cetera. And then the countryside becomes the Taliban's.

We also need to go back and do the forensics on the Taliban as a threat. I would propose to you that the threat is a triangular one, where you have the ideological insurgency; you have, very importantly and perhaps even more prominent, the criminal patronage networks; and then you have the drug enterprise that fuels both of the first two. These three aspects of the threat have been present the entire time. But as commander, I had no authority to go after the criminal patronage networks, unless I could tie them directly into the Taliban military actions associated with my forces. I also couldn't go after the drug enterprise, unless I could show the very direct relationship between a particular drug kingpin or drug lab and the Taliban's ability to threaten my forces.

So two legs of the threat were largely left unaddressed. There of course were State Department colleagues, and there were Drug Enforcement Agency personnel, et cetera, but they were never there in the kinds of numbers necessary.

I think Colombia is one of the prime examples of where you had an ideological insurgency serving as local security and the muscle for the criminal patronage networks, and you had the drug cartels fueling it all; and Colombia is one of the great unsung victories of our support to any particular country. We are going to find in the future a similar triangular threat. Unless our commanders have the capacity at a grand strategic level to deal with all three of those things simultaneously—using law enforcement capabilities to bring down criminal patronage networks, and going after the kingpins in the drug enterprise—dealing with the ideological insurgency alone will never be enough.

In the north and west of Afghanistan, where we had the German-led and Italian-led coalitions respectively, we defeated the Taliban. What we discovered was that we had uncovered the criminal patronage networks, which had captured entire provincial governments. Frankly, the war in the end for me was, by the time I left, less about defeating the Taliban than it was about unlimbering elements of the Afghan government from capture by criminality and corruption. I left Afghanistan believing that the Taliban is a tactical problem that, over time, we could defeat. The threat out of Pakistan is an operational threat, which, if we posture the Afghans correctly over time, we eliminate, deal with, or manage. But unless we deal systematically with the drug enterprise and the criminal capture of major institutions of the Afghan state, we will never win this war. Corruption, in the end, is the principal threat to our long-term objectives in Afghanistan.

As long as we send commanders into these kinds of operational environments without the authorities necessary to deal with all three of these threats simultaneously, even the long-term presence of American and allied capabilities will not be up to the challenge. We should have recognized this in Afghanistan back

in 2003-04 and as the ramping up began, and we should have supported more exchanges between Afghan officials and Colombian officials, who had successfully dealt with this triumvirate of threats before.

BRUCE JONES: We saw some of this in Haiti as well, where Canadians and Danes were trying to build Haiti into Canada or Denmark, and it doesn't work. Where you saw genuine success was with the Colombian police working with the Haitian police. Local forces could be made more effective, but they are not going to be perfectly non-corrupt; they are not going to be perfect on human rights; but they have a model of how you can do this sustainably. The experience of the middle-income countries could be brought to bear more often in places like Afghanistan, even if each case is different.

JOHN ALLEN: When I took command in Afghanistan, within a day or so of being there, I brought my staff in to my office, and I said to them, "no more big ideas." We are out of the business of bringing big, Western ideas to Afghanistan, because just in infrastructure improvements alone we are saddling the Afghans with an annual infrastructure renovation cost of billions of dollars that they'll never be able to sustain. From now on, I said, present ideas that have a sustainable Afghan outcome. Everybody got it at that point, but once again, we were too late.

Marine Corps Gen. John R. Allen, commander of NATO and International Security Assistance Force troops in Afghanistan, and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker are thanked by President Hamid Karzai for their attendance of an Afghanistan Independence Day celebration at the Ministry of National Defense in Kabul, Aug. 19, 2011. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Michael O'Connor)

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN: From the very beginning of the U.S. intervention, when there was the largest window of opportunity to embrace Afghan aspirations for good governance and shape the outcome, and throughout 2014, when the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan was radically reduced, Washington neglected to commit itself to rebuilding Afghanistan in the right way. By ultimately choosing to define the campaign in Afghanistan as an essentially limited counterterrorism mission, despite the massive surge of U.S. troops, and by undermining the military surge with artificial timelines, Washington sidestepped the

aspirations of the Afghan people. I believe the Obama administration's profound skepticism toward "nation-building" drove this. The international community and the Afghan government failed to take advantage of several possible inflection points where, with the Afghan government, we could have fundamentally altered the course of the country. And to the extent that there were earnest efforts, such as during the first two years of the Obama administration, other strategic directives, timelines, and imperatives interfered with them and directly contradicted them.

TANVI MADAN: All of the examples we've mentioned, Colombia included, took time. The question comes down to how much time the U.S. is willing to devote to this mission. If, yet again, there is a sense in the region that the U.S. is retrenching or withdrawing, the U.S. will immediately surrender leverage.

JOHN ALLEN: Yes, as we've all heard many, many times, the Taliban believes that time is on their side. But even if we have a troop level that is numerically sufficient and sufficient in capability, and we are there for some long period of time—and time is no longer on their side—then we still have the issue of helping the Afghan state to become sufficiently credible at governing—and governing in Afghanistan is very different to governing almost anywhere else. But if you understand that, then you also have to keep in mind that the Afghans have the capacity for really substantial economic progress if they have the security platform and a government that supports economic progress.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: One related point that I believe the American strategic community often gets wrong is its consensus that we Americans "have no strategic patience." People say this all the time. It plays exactly into this narrative that we are not going to stay long enough to make a difference. But historically I think it's wrong. We stayed in Korea, and we are still there; we stayed for decades when the North Korean threat was there, and the South Koreans hadn't even become a democracy yet.

JOHN ALLEN: That's right.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: And we did this also with Egypt and Israel for decades, and we are still engaged with them through thick and thin. So I think we are actually pretty good at strategic patience, even if we insist on telling ourselves that we are not. We tell ourselves that in op-eds, and in public and policy debates, and President Obama—I believe—misinterpreted CNN poll data suggesting that Americans opposed the war in Afghanistan more than the war in Vietnam, developing a whole narrative in those terms.

But that's not the right way to think about it. Americans never thought of Afghanistan as Vietnam. They didn't like it, but there was a far lower level of intensity of feeling. And we've proven our ability to stick with tough tasks for a long time, even when it doesn't seem on the surface to be getting any better.

BRUCE JONES: Is there a kind of wider coalition for action here, beyond the International Security Assistance Force? Pakistan—which we've discussed—India, Russia, China, Turkmenistan, all have stakes; all have fingers in the pie; all have a variety of actors in-country, economic and security, et cetera. Putting aside Pakistan for a moment, have we, through the course of this campaign, put enough effort into the regional dimensions of the problem?

MICHAEL O'HANLON: The natural answer is to say no. But I think it's worth recalling that we tried hard in a number of ways, and a number of times. I'm thinking of the Northern Distribution Network in that golden period when we were getting along okay with Russia under then-President Medvedev, and there was enormous effort—led initially by General Petraeus at Central Command—to manage that relationship. When General Allen was commander and we had the big breakdown in relations with Pakistan and lost Pakistani access routes, he actually was able to—despite that challenge—net increase the supplies in his warehouses over the six months because the U.S.-Russia relationship was working so effectively. But, of course, that was a limited window in time; it was for a specific set of purposes; and it certainly didn't survive the transition back to Putin. So, through that case study, I would say the answer to the question is ultimately no—we haven't done enough—but it's not for lack of trying. It just hasn't proved sustainable.

TANVI MADAN: Mike is right. It's varied over time and by actor, and in many cases it's been derivative of

the broader U.S. relationship with that particular country—whether it's Russia, Iran, or others. What makes this somewhat complicated is that, for each interested country, you could have a pretty complex matrix of interests and goals. Sometimes the U.S. shared some of those objectives, but not necessarily the means to those ends. That's often where the difficulties arise. A lot of countries have come together on the economic side, but on the security side, everybody's version of stability, and how to get there, is quite different.

The other country that is increasingly active in the region is, of course, China. You already have a Russia-China-Pakistan trilateral dialogue about Afghanistan. You have the Russians also including Iran in the last set of discussions. So this is all going on as the administration completes its policy review.

As Mike suggests, broader geopolitical cooperation on Afghanistan in terms of engaging regional actors has not been consistent. For example, the U.S.-Afghanistan-India trilateral dialogue was established in 2012, but then after two rounds, was essentially put on hold for a couple of years before it was revived in 2016. One more risk of further delay in announcing a U.S. strategy is that there is only so long that regional actors will wait until they work out arrangements amongst themselves, and even if they are not explicitly excluding the U.S., they aren't really keeping in mind U.S. interests not only in Afghanistan, but throughout the region.

BRUCE JONES: Given that there has been a consensus across administrations to develop a deeper, tighter relationship with India, was there a missed opportunity on Afghanistan? Did we treat India too much like just one of many regional competitors for influence?

TANVI MADAN: In general, the U.S. and India have agreed that they'd like to see a stable Afghanistan, including a government that is chosen by Afghans and not put in place by any other countries. They also have shared concerns about the Taliban as a threat to such stability. But there have been differences on a few things, such as whether to talk to the Taliban and Pakistan's role in the process. The U.S. view of India's role also has evolved over time, initially asking India not to do too much out of concern for how Pakistan would react, but then later wanting India to do more. So there have been differences, some of which impact the broader U.S.-India relationship. India doesn't want to put troops on the ground in Afghanistan but could find other ways of contributing more, including through resources and capacity-building.

BRUCE RIEDEL: It seems to me there have been two concentric circles here. The outer circle is huge, and it includes Japan, Russia, China, India, the Gulf countries, and the Europeans. We have engaged fitfully with those partners. Former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke succeeded in creating a counterpart in nearly every one of those countries—and the few who still endure are desperate to find someone to talk to in Washington. That engagement is well worth doing and important to do. But it's an outer circle.

The inner circle features the two countries—Pakistan and Iran—that have the longest borders with Afghanistan. One of our problems all along has been that one of those countries is beyond the pale. The one period where we were actually making a lot of progress quickly is 2002, when we enlisted the Iranians as a co-partner in Afghanistan. But if the current administration has now determined that Iran is the number-one threat to world peace, I don't see how we're going to get much help there. In fact, I already see signs that the Iranians are looking at Afghanistan as one of the places to stick it to the Americans if they want to pursue a significant anti-Iran policy; Iraq, obviously, is another. There's a definite uptick in Iranian interaction with the Afghan Taliban, and that's not good.

Then there's Pakistan. There is no single Pakistani policy on Afghanistan; there are multiple Pakistani policies. Even within the Pakistani army, there are multiple Pakistani army policies on Afghanistan. I'll save the "what-to-do-about-Pakistan" part of this until we get to policy recommendations. But I think the Iran problem is a big hole here, and it's going to get worse. The Italian contingent of ISAF managed the dynamic very well under the surface, keeping it out of the limelight for a long time. But it's going to be a lot harder to do that in the next phase.

II. U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

BRUCE JONES: In light of all that we've discussed, and given where we are now, if you have half an hour with the president, what is the core of your recommendation?

MICHAEL O'HANLON: First, as we've discussed, we need to be able to get out into the field with Afghan military and police units. I'd cite the example of Helmand Province, which has regressed dramatically in the last couple of years after the extraordinary sacrifice of so many Marines, so many British troops, and many Afghans. The main problem there was, obviously, Taliban strength. But we left the Afghan Army Corps in Helmand entirely without mentors. We saw the same thing in Kunduz when the city fell there in the fall of 2015. We couldn't solve all the political problems in Kunduz, but we could have been out there with the key security units, providing some of the oversight and mentoring that General Allen talked about earlier, and I think that might have prevented Kunduz from falling in the first place. All of this is why, on the security side, I support sending back several thousand more troops.

On political reforms, we have to just keep at it and, at times, be content playing small ball. For example, the Afghans were supposed to have parliamentary elections recently and haven't in part because their electoral commissions haven't been rebuilt. We should help prod them to rebuild those commissions. We also need to accept that they will have imperfect elections again. But that's ok, as long as there is modestly higher confidence the next time, and a sense that politics are improving, even if ever so slowly, in the right direction. I also would do little things like creating parliamentary research agencies for the parliament in order to give them more independent access to information and help develop their policy thinking. Small ball is okay, as long as the big picture politics don't fall apart in the meantime.

BRUCE JONES: So you're not recommending any fundamental change in what we're trying to do. In broad strokes, you subscribe to the view that this is about trying, over time, to help Afghans build a state that's capable of controlling the territory and not allowing it to become Taliban-led.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Correct. I hope Bruce Riedel's ideas on Pakistan will work, and I would love it if we could get to a peace deal with the Taliban. But people have been saying for a long time that we need a new political strategy for Afghanistan that brings peace with the Taliban, and I've never found that persuasive because the Taliban think they're winning. The only way in which there's going to be an acceptable negotiation is when they realize they're not. So I am of the view that a political strategy for dealing with the Taliban is secondary to strengthening the Afghan state and Afghan security.

BRUCE JONES: And please lay out what, for you, is the compelling strategic rationale for why we need to stick with this mission.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: Reading Bruce Riedel and others who are experts on extremism in South Asia, I've been struck by the interlinkages across the different terrorist groups—and I learned this from General Allen too. I just don't see these groups staying in their boxes. So, it's the Taliban one day; Lashkar-e-Taiba the next; al-Qaida the next; and ISIS the following—or, at least, they're collaborating across these organizations. And Lashkar-e-Taiba, in my opinion, because of its role in stoking India-Pakistan tensions, is still the number-one candidate for producing nuclear war on planet earth. So there's a pretty good reason for keeping eyes and ears on groups that may be helping Lashkar-e-Taiba, or vice versa. Similarly, ISIS strongholds in one place may grow over time and then cross-fertilize with others.

The basic logic of General Joseph Dunford's concept, which, I think, General Martin Dempsey had helped generate before, was that we needed to create several regional strongholds that provide a combination of intelligence platforms, special forces, operating platforms, and partnership capabilities with key states in the broader Middle East region. Afghanistan provides one such stronghold, in effect the eastern flank of the overall effort. I think this is correct, particularly as we look out over what's going to be a generation-long struggle against extremism. We can't be too precise about deciding who's our enemy and who's not—because the enemy isn't that precise—and they are more than willing to become free agents now and again to help each other.

On April 24, 2017, the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence at Brookings (21CSI) hosted a discussion on current security and political dynamics in Afghanistan. The panel included Afghan Ambassador to the U.S. Hamdullah Mohib; former minister of finance and transportation, and current opposition politician Anwar ul-Haq; Brookings Senior Fellow Vanda Felbab-Brown; and 21CSI Co-Director Michael O'Hanlon. (Brookings photo by Paul Morigi)

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN: Increasing the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is important, but not sufficient. The United States and the international community must work with the Afghan government to reduce corruption and improve governance. Even taking some modest but sustained steps could make a big difference. This means tackling the most dangerous forms of corruption, particularly in the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces (ANDSF), rooting out discrimination against entire ethnic and tribal groups that drives local populations into the hands of the Taliban, and targeting corruption that paralyzes service delivery. It means reining in predatory criminality and destabilizing warlords one at a time, without taking on the entire system at once, and focusing on the most egregious crimes such as land theft, monopolistic domination of local economic markets, and rape and murder. And then you have to properly sequence counternarcotics efforts with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, including by maintaining a suspension of drug eradication, as eradication drives local populations into the hands of the Taliban.

Good governance is a long-term project, and, on its own, is of course insufficient. But without evident progress toward it, beefed-up military efforts will struggle to achieve sustainability. And opportunities will remain for terrorist groups to entrench themselves in Afghanistan.

BRUCE RIEDEL: I would say to the president, you don't want to be the president who actually loses Afghanistan. Your four predecessors can all be held accountable in one way or another for having lost Afghanistan over time. But none of them did it in such a dramatic way such as by being televised live. You don't want that to happen. That would be disastrous. While this is not an imminent risk, the enemy certainly thinks it's doable, and that's why we have to disabuse the Afghan Taliban—and their Pakistani and other supporters—of the confidence that time is necessarily on their side. You do that in part through all the steps that Mike has laid out, but you also have to do it by changing their calculation about safe havens.

We have to make it less safe to travel to an Afghan Taliban base camp in Baluchistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. We did that only once in the last year with the targeting of Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mansour. We don't have to do it at a pace similar to that against al-Qaida in 2009 and 2010, but it shouldn't be a once-a-year phenomenon. It should be enough that we change the perception that they are safe.

Perhaps strikes need to extend to headquarters in places like Quetta. Again, I am not making a case for doing it every day, but it shouldn't seem inconceivable. This will begin to put strains on the Afghan Taliban-Pakistan relationship; it begins to change the perception that, no matter what happens, time will always be

on their side because they have a base that is secure. In most studies of guerilla warfare, people argue that, if a guerilla force has a secure base across the border, they cannot be defeated. We certainly discovered in the 1980s that, if you have a base in Pakistan, you can defeat the Soviet Red Army. But the Soviets, by the way, were far more willing to cross the border than we've ever been.

This shouldn't be the sum of the policy. There also should be a coherent overall approach to the problem in Afghanistan. In addition to consideration of troop levels, rules of engagement, and drone strikes, there is also the question of how we engage with Pakistan in general, and whether we try to strengthen those forces in Pakistan that have in mind the same outcome in Afghanistan as we do—which includes, I think, the current Pakistani prime minister, Nawaz Sharif.

The critical thing is a coherent overall approach, not just a forced, numbers-driven approach, which will be very difficult to explain to the broad audience of foreign states that need to be included, or to the Pakistanis. I fear that the current administration has got itself into a box already by putting out a request for an increase in troop numbers. The danger is that, depending on how this is rolled out, whether it is nested in a broader strategy, in Quetta and in Rawalpindi, they're going to say, "yep, time is on our side; the Americans are not retreating yet, but they're not sending any more reinforcements."

JOHN ALLEN: "We've already beaten these guys."

BRUCE RIEDEL: "We've already beaten these guys. They're not going to fight."

JOHN ALLEN: The first thing I would say to the president is to applaud his willingness to even think about putting more troops back in. If we end up really putting 5,000 more troops in, it gets us to the point with U.S. troops where we had recommended that they be years ago.

But I would say to the president that it's not just the numbers; it's the combination of capabilities that we're putting back in to provide for the upward professionalization, training, and advising of the Afghans both in terms of Afghan force production/generation as well as their operational commitment.

Sharing the views of others here, I also would say to the president that we've got to have a far more comprehensive approach with respect to Afghanistan and the region. We need a strategy that embraces capacity-building for governance. Capacity-building is different than nation-building; but it is essential. And, very importantly, we the United States need to be the convening power that injects both coherence and capability into the Afghan economy. If we want ultimately to defeat the Taliban, it's not just about the tactical fight; it's about fundamentally changing the environment in which the Afghan economy exists. It's about putting Afghans to work and exploiting the multitrillion dollar natural assets underneath the ground in Afghanistan. Here I am repeating the point that was made by others—that it's more than just the troop numbers, it has to be a coherent U.S.-led, U.S.-convened global strategy to build the capacity of the Afghan government to be viable and, very importantly, to get the economy going. But in the meantime, we have to put in the troops necessary to create that security platform whereby those other two things can occur.

I also would say to the president that he's right continue to call for fighting extremists. But it's much more nuanced than that; today it's important that we recognize that the extremists we have to fight are not just ideological extremists, but also major criminal elements and networks. Vanda can take us root-and-branch through the reality that, more so than ever before, terrorist organizations and criminal organizations—global criminal organizations—are in some cases nearly indistinguishable, nearly inseparable. Their symbiosis creates opportunities for terrorists or opportunities for criminals that we've not seen before. And in many respects, it's the criminal networks that are more lethal and more dangerous to us and our objectives than the religious or ideological extremists.

So we have to cut off the oxygen for these groups by attacking the finances, which in most cases are fueled by some aspect of illicit activity—most often the drug trade, but the supportive illicit activity comes in many, often complementary, forms. Our strategy has got to have those three components—governance, economics, and security. If it doesn't, then no matter what we do in Afghanistan, no matter what we do in

post-war Yemen, no matter what we do in post-conflict Libya, then we'll never have the outcomes we want.

And finally, we have to be prepared to stay on the ground long enough. That's really essential.

BRUCE JONES: Do you agree with Bruce Riedel's recommendation for an uptick in cross-border operations and other forms of pressure on Pakistan that could shift the calculus underlying Pakistani support for the Afghan Taliban?

JOHN ALLEN: It's hard to understand with any real clarity what Pakistani support for the Taliban really looks like. Before the disaster that closed down my ground line of communications for nine months—which was the death of 24 Pakistani troops from NATO airstrikes on a couple of border locations—I was in frequent conversation with Pakistani Chief of Army Staff General Kayani about shared operations along the border that could, on the one side, preclude the free movement back and forth of the Afghan Taliban, and, on the other side, help Pakistan to eliminate the Pakistani Taliban that was, in fact, attacking Pakistani troops.

I always had a sense that General Kayani was committed to helping me in that regard, but we never were able to get there, in part because of the timeline of our troop drawdown. I told him that if we didn't go right then, I wouldn't have the combat power to help him in the very near future. He was never able to put together the operation, I think, to his satisfaction. And then I didn't have the combat power when we finally were able to have the full conversation, and the Afghans didn't yet have the capabilities themselves.

BRUCE JONES: I was once told that leaders of Pakistan's armed services and intelligence services had reached the conclusion that, while India was printing millionaires, Pakistan's strategic policy was based on "a 14th century pile of rocks," and they knew that they needed to shift their strategy but lacked the confidence that they could bring the rank-and-file along, and therefore feared that moving in very deliberate ways would expose deep fractures within the security establishment.

BRUCE RIEDEL: Yes, Pakistan is an incredibly complicated animal. One recommendation to the Obama administration in 2009 was that the U.S. intelligence community be tasked to produce four times a year a balance sheet—this is what the Pakistani army is doing for us; this is what it's doing against us, and so on—so that we could have a more comprehensive understanding of this puzzle. To the best of my knowledge, that didn't happen.

We have done a very slipshod job in this conflict in understanding the enemy. In World War II, we got in the heads of the Nazis; in the Cold War, we devoted hundreds of think tanks and universities to understanding the Soviet Union; for Afghanistan and Pakistan, we've done nothing like that. In Kabul, we of course have people who have studied this problem pretty hard—and they rotate out every year. Another person comes in and studies it hard again. There's not much of a support base—in terms of deep political and cultural understanding—back in the United States. We've spent a lot of intellectual capital on al-Qaida. The Islamic State has been a strong niche market recently. But in Afghanistan, people have been killing American GI's for the last 16 years. So another recommendation to the president would be to make sure the intelligence community is making the Afghan Taliban the high priority it deserves to be.

TANVI MADAN: We need to look closely at the dynamics in Pakistan. This notion that senior Pakistani military and intelligence leadership is "boxed in" by the colonels below, the leadership has used extremist groups as an instrument of state power. It is not a recent or one-time development. It ranges back to long before the colonels were apparently objecting. It's come from the top down, and not just from the bottom up. There has to be a fundamental recalculation, and this is where Bruce Riedel's point is crucial. How do you change their calculation? In Pakistan, there is this "good terrorist-bad terrorist" idea that will eventually come back to bite them. It already has in some ways. It isn't viable to take on the Pakistani Taliban, but not take on the Haqqani network or Lashkar-e-Taiba—because that distinction is specious. Countries have played along, but it's not sustainable in the long term.

In terms of in the U.S., you also have to make the case to the public, or else no policy will be sustainable;

without that I think that within the administration there will be opposition from key actors. So you have to draw a picture of what an Afghanistan without the U.S. would look like. And then you have to make a case for the American security interest in a continued U.S. mission in Afghanistan, which is that American security will be directly threatened if Afghanistan once again becomes a place from which extremist groups, criminal networks, or terrorist groups are able to attack U.S. interests, facilities, and citizens around the world. I also would make the argument that you cannot do the same thing you've done for years and expect different results.

One advantage President Trump has is a team that is well-experienced. He has a team that is familiar with the history, mistakes, and what is possible versus what is not.

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN: The Pakistani military long viewed Afghanistan as a source of needed strategic depth during any future military confrontations with India, considering it an imperative to be able to redeploy back into Afghanistan, recoup forces there, and launch a counterattack against India. Over the past several years, Pakistan's civilian politicians and envoys to the United States have dismissed the concept of strategic depth in Afghanistan, arguing that, while always exaggerated, such a strategy long ago stopped being Pakistan's policy. But from Pakistan's strategic perspective, encirclement by hostile powers in Afghanistan and India must be avoided. But I believe that Pakistan's policies toward the militants, including its unwillingness for years to launch a military operation into North Waziristan to dislodge the Afghan Taliban there, despite years of intense U.S. pressure, are determined as much by incompetence, inertia, and a lack of capacity, as by calibrated duplicitous misdirection.

BRUCE JONES: To be devil's advocate for a moment, my sense is that, whenever the Obama administration discussed ratcheting up the pressure on Pakistan, some of the countervailing interests got in the way. Those include certain nuclear security concerns, as well as an interest in maintaining some leverage with the Pakistanis to help manage the volatility in Indo-Pakistani tensions. So is it your sense that those concerns are overblown? How do we balance those?

JOHN ALLEN: No, they are not overblown concerns. I wake every morning hoping that, as Bruce Riedel has written about, an extremist group hasn't gained control of a Pakistani nuclear weapon or other fissile material overnight. And Pakistan's is the fastest growing nuclear arsenal on the planet. But I used to believe that all opportunity for peace in Afghanistan passed through Islamabad or Rawalpindi (home of the Pakistan Army headquarters). Unless you brought them on board, it was not possible. I'm not sure I believe that anymore. In fact, I ultimately became so concerned about Pakistani stability, and saw genuine progress on the ground in Afghanistan, that I began to say that, in the end, Pakistani stability may well pass through Kabul.

The problem is that many Pakistanis truly believe that the United States is after their nuclear weapons. But, in fact, it's in everyone's interest that Pakistan remain a stable place, and the more we underscore that point publicly and privately, the better. The Pakistanis will often say it's about managing Pashtun politics. So long as the Pashtun face in the direction of both Islamabad and also Kabul, they'd say, then we don't have a crisis; but if the Pashtun nation ever points only toward one capitol or the other, then the other state is going to be immediately destabilized in a very major way.

Congressional delegations passing through my headquarters in Afghanistan were sometimes quite keen to go up to Islamabad and just hammer the Pakistanis. I often suggested to them that, while we have plenty of problems with the Taliban coming out of Pakistan, we could posture the Afghan forces to deal with the Haqqani threat over time. And I warned that, if all we do is hammer Islamabad, you need to think about whether we may inadvertently create a sequence of events that could quickly destabilize the country. So we've got to be very careful; Pakistan is enormously complex. There's an active insurgency in nearly every one of its provinces, and we've got to be circumspect about the demands we place on the country. This is not to suggest we turn a blind eye or not put pressure on them. Nor does it mean that we shouldn't sometimes act in a punitive way. But we do need a comprehensive approach that accounts for Pakistan's complexities.

TANVI MADAN: The fundamental challenge has been finding that correct balance. People have had different

judgments of whether too many carrots or too many sticks have been used with Pakistan. Yes, on one hand, there's concern about having leverage because of Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons; but on the other hand, those same nuclear weapons give Pakistan an umbrella under which it can engage in destabilizing behavior. It's difficult to manage the carrots and sticks in a way that leads to change.

I think some exaggerate the amount of leverage the U.S. has with Pakistan; others underestimate it. It's important to remember that there are at least two other actors that have leverage with Pakistan—one is China, and one is Saudi Arabia. China has successfully put pressure on Pakistan, but only with respect to certain extremist groups. Is there a way to get China to broaden that pressure? I think we are going to naturally move in that direction as Chinese firms and workers become more active in Pakistan. But there's also the danger that the leverage will diminish as they see themselves as needing Pakistan more as they become more enmeshed because of investments there.

Because of the history, I understand the skepticism of people who say, well, we can't change their behavior, so we need an Afghanistan strategy that assumes you're not going to get cooperation from Pakistan. But you can't ignore it. It's noteworthy that Lisa Curtis, the current senior director for South Asian affairs at the National Security Council, along with the former Pakistani ambassador to the U.S., Husain Haqqani, led a task force that looked into how you thread the needle and find the right balance.

JOHN ALLEN: Tanvi couldn't be more correct, including about the Chinese dimension.

BRUCE RIEDEL: The Saudis have some leverage in Pakistan. But they have lost the influence they once had due to the war in Yemen. Two years ago, Pakistan's parliament voted unanimously to reject Saudi requests for Pakistani troops to fight in Yemen. Criticism of the kingdom has become widespread. So I'm skeptical that the Saudis will be a player. China is the most important player for the Pakistani military.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: My view on Pakistan is similar to what has been expressed here. U.S. assistance to Pakistan has already been cut roughly in half; more could be cut. The U.S. could also designate Pakistani individuals and organizations supporting the Taliban and impose sanctions on them. The U.S. could show less restraint in striking Taliban targets within Pakistan.

There are carrots available too: trade concessions, increased aid, more assistance to the Pakistani army's fight against internal extremists, dialogue with New Delhi to mitigate Pakistan's worries about India's role in Afghanistan. But these must come on the condition that Islamabad put greater pressure on the Taliban (whose headquarters is in the Quetta area) and on the Haqqani insurgent network (in North Waziristan).

BRUCE JONES: Mentioning the Chinese and others raises the questions of, why is this only our problem, not the U.N. Security Council's problem or much more of NATO's problem, particularly given the terrorist threat to Europe today? Why is this not a problem that more of the world shares in addressing? We will lead, but why should we not insist this is a country where the Russians, the Germans, the Indians, et cetera, all have real interests in contributing more to this mission? What's the argument against that?

TANVI MADAN: Other actors do need to be more involved. But it might be different actors on each of the sides of General Allen's governance-economics-security triangle. There needs to be an understanding that countries will come at us with different interests in mind, and different ideas of what Afghanistan should look like. So, I don't think it should be just a U.S. responsibility; partner countries who have an interest in seeing the U.S. stay in Afghanistan should show that they are willing to either increase their commitment or, at least, highlight what their contributions are. But we have to be realistic about the fact that there are countries involved there who have interests that don't match those of the U.S.

BRUCE JONES: John, you have a PhD in coalition management. What is your sense of the possibility for greater burden-sharing at this juncture?

JOHN ALLEN: Well, as you know, we had a viable 50-nation coalition, and then there were also silent partners in that coalition. India was, I think, a very viable silent partner; they did some tremendous work on heavy infrastructure.

The United States brings two things to almost any challenge in the world. It brings convening power, and it brings global reach; and if we really believe that the outcome in Afghanistan justifies the continued investment of blood and treasure, then the United States needs to continue the leadership of what it has undertaken by continuing to convene and corral the community of nations toward that outcome.

You know, for example, there was zero talk, really, about the so-called New Silk Road until the environment in Afghanistan allowed us to think beyond the conflict, and what the role of Afghanistan could be in connecting China to the West. European partners have told me quite clearly that, if the United States is committed to staying, and if the United States has clear objectives and makes a greater investment, we'll be there with you. Led in many respects by Germany, Europe has been clear about new investments to help move the Afghans to a viable economic future. United States leadership can't be just about the security aspect of Afghanistan. It's got to be comprehensive leadership. But that, by the way, is becoming more difficult day by day, especially with our European partners who feel slighted by the current administration. It will be increasingly difficult to make the case—both in terms of the counter-ISIS coalition or adding more troops into Afghanistan—that they should invest more blood and treasure when the president of the United States, who has been pretty rough on many of our partners, is asking for this; the political cost to the leadership in those countries of sending more of their troops downrange in response to a request by President Trump is increasing. They're going to be increasingly circumspect. And that's a consequence of moving from transformational leadership to transactional relationships.

BRUCE RIEDEL: I would make one final point, which is that, in order to sell a credible Afghanistan policy in the White House—let alone to the rest of the world—it's got to be explained as not just more of the same. It's pretty hard after 16 years to persuade anyone that more of the same will get us to a satisfactory outcome. The administration can't just say, "we're going to send 5,000 more troops to get to the level we should have had in the Obama administration." I suspect White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon will be quite adamant and say, four years from now, we're going to be in the same boat we are now. The strategy has to be more creative and deal with some of these problems in a manner that is not simply repackaged Obama or repackaged George W. Bush. Part of that is a Pakistan component; but part of it also has to be going after the drug cartels and criminal networks. We're not going to persuade anyone—including ourselves—that we have a real approach if it's just, "let's do what we've been doing for 16 years."

BRUCE JONES: Yes, I am thinking about how this conversation goes with a university audience in St. Louis, or Columbus, Ohio. You can anticipate the pushback.

BRUCE RIEDEL: Believe me, I've had it. It's unpleasant.

JOHN ALLEN: Yes, when I have had this conversation and talk only about security measures, it's an unpleasant conversation. But when you talk about a more comprehensive approach, it's a different conversation. One point that is missed too often is that, one of the measures of a society, and whether it is progressing or regressing, is life expectancy. Since we have been in Afghanistan—since 2001—life expectancy has gone from about 55 years to 60 years (see Figure 3). Ticking up the life expectancy in a country that has been at war for three full decades is a pretty substantial achievement. As Bruce Riedel mentioned earlier, there are 9 million children in school—a roughly 9-fold increase over 2001. And 40 percent are girls. That's an unbelievable accomplishment. Almost 60 percent of the Afghan population is within a one-hour walk of medical care—about a six-fold increase over 2001. That is another massive achievement. Civil society has been strengthened, including its awareness of the rights of women and minorities.

Every one of these things is a direct outcome of western involvement and can be traced, in particular, to U.S. leadership. If we turn this process over to someone else—say, the Russians or the Chinese or anyone else—there will be less emphasis on the social progress that has really redefined Afghanistan in very important ways, and that often has been completely overlooked in the conversation.

BRUCE JONES: This reminds me that, when U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan accepted the Nobel Prize in 2001, he used much of his time to talk about Afghanistan, and he noted that there was a one-in-four risk

that a girl born in Afghanistan that year would not live to see her fifth birthday; whether she would, he said, was our common test. Perhaps the current administration needs to do something similar and go back to the years under the Taliban and remind everyone what it looked like, and show the social progress that has been made—all on top of the imperative of preventing future terrorist attacks.

TANVI MADAN: But I do think—to return to our earlier discussion about sustaining public support—that the case becomes easier to make if it's accompanied by a nation-building effort at home, because, again, if you ran a campaign on that—and the last two presidents have done so to different degrees—you need all three elements actually: the security imperative, social progress in Afghanistan, and nation-building at home. You also want to make the case that this is not an either/or proposition. If you can't make that case, I don't think the effort will be sustainable. You might get another year or two.

BRUCE JONES: I've always wanted to see an American president giving this kind of speech about our interests and our long-term commitment with both the Democratic and Republican Senate Foreign Relations Committee members standing beside him. I suspect the odds of that are low at the current moment.

Thanks very much to all of you.

ABOUT THE PANELISTS

JOHN ALLEN

John R. Allen is a retired U.S. Marine Corps four-star general and former commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Prior to joining Brookings as senior fellow and co-director of the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, Allen served as special presidential envoy to the global coalition to counter ISIL, a position he held for 14 months. Immediately following retirement from the Marine Corps, Allen was the senior advisor to the secretary of defense on Middle East Security, and in that role he led the security dialogue with Israel and the Palestinian Authority for 15 months within the Middle East peace process.

As a general officer, Allen served as the principal director of Asia-Pacific policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, a position he held for nearly three years. In this assignment, he was involved extensively on policy initiatives involving Mongolia, China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. He was also involved in the Six Party Talks on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN

Vanda Felbab-Brown is a senior fellow in the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. She is also the director of the Brookings project "Improving Global Drug Policy: Comparative Perspectives and UNGASS 2016" and co-director of another Brookings project, "Reconstituting Local Orders." She is an expert on international and internal conflicts and nontraditional security threats, including insurgency, organized crime, urban violence, and illicit economies. Her fieldwork and research have covered, among others, Afghanistan, South Asia, Burma, Indonesia, the Andean region, Mexico, Morocco, Somalia, and eastern Africa.

TANVI MADAN

Tanvi Madan is a fellow in the Project on International Order and Strategy in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution, and director of The India Project. Madan's work explores Indian foreign policy, focusing in particular on India's relations with China and the United States. She also researches the intersection between Indian energy policies and its foreign and security policies.

MICHAEL O'HANLON

Michael O'Hanlon is a senior fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, where he specializes in U.S. defense strategy, the use of military force, and American national security policy. He is also director of research for the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. He is an adjunct professor at Columbia, Princeton, and Syracuse universities and University of Denver. He is also a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. O'Hanlon was a member of the external advisory board at the Central Intelligence Agency from 2011 to 2012. He is a commentator and consultant on Alhurra TV.

BRUCE RIEDEL

Bruce Riedel is a senior fellow and director of the Brookings Intelligence Project, part of the Brookings Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence. In addition, Riedel serves as a senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy. He retired in 2006 after 30 years of service at the Central Intelligence Agency, including postings overseas. He was a senior advisor on South Asia and the Middle East to the last four

presidents of the United States in the staff of the National Security Council at the White House. He was also deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Near East and South Asia at the Pentagon and a senior advisor at NATO in Brussels.

Riedel was a member of President Bill Clinton's peace process team and negotiated at Camp David and other Arab-Israeli summits and he organized Clinton's trip to India in 2000. In January 2009, President Barack Obama asked him to chair a review of American policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, the results of which the president announced in a speech on March 27, 2009.

In 2011, Riedel served as an expert advisor to the prosecution of al-Qaida terrorist Omar Farooq Abdulmutallab in Detroit. In December 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron asked him to brief the United Kingdom's National Security Council in London on Pakistan.

TARUN CHHABRA

Tarun Chhabra is a fellow with the Project on International Order and Strategy at the Brookings Institution. Previously, he served on the National Security Council (NSC) staff as director for strategic planning (2016-2017) and director for human rights and national security issues (2015-2016).

BRUCE JONES

Bruce Jones is vice president and director of the Foreign Policy program at Brookings and a senior fellow in the Institution's Project on International Order and Strategy at Brookings. Jones' research expertise and policy experience is in international security.

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