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Featured Speaker:

BRIGADIER GENERAL ROGER B. TURNER, JR
United States Marine Corps

Moderator:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Brookings. Happy holiday weekend. I'm Mike O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy Program. And I have the privilege of introducing Brigadier General Roger Turner, who's just back from Afghanistan where he's been working to restore a U.S. presence and restore a U.S. mentorship in the Helmand Province, one of the crucial provinces of the country and the battles of the last 17 years.

So we're going to hear from General Turner with his initial presentation. He's got some slides which will be nice for situational awareness and for repositioning us inside that Afghan space, understanding the geography and the military topography of Helmand Province. He'll talk through a little bit of what's been happening there over the last year. Then he and I will get together for a conversation on stage before we invite your questions. And we'll do all that in 60 minutes.

Just a couple of brief words, therefore, about General Turner, whom we're thrilled to have. We've been exchanging stories about all the different times he's worked for the Generals Kelly, Mattis, and Allen, who continue to be prominent across town and at Brookings. And we're thrilled to have such an important Marine general, and watch out for where he may be headed given where the pedigree has been going of late. But where he's headed in the short term is to California to help train Marines, which I know is near and dear to his heart.

He has been in the Marine Corps since 1984, through the ROTC

program and going to the University of Maryland. An infantry officer, he's a very young man by my standards, but he's old enough to have been through almost all the big missions of the last 20-some years, starting with Operation Desert Storm. Quite active throughout the broader Pacific region, as most Marines are at one point or another in their careers, in the 1990s. And then for the 10-year period of Operation Iraqi Freedom through the early 2010s, he spent roughly half that time by my calculations in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

He then came back to the United States for a while, but, as I say, spent over a year in Helmand Province as a mentor and the lead American advisor to the Afghan military in Helmand Province.

So without further ado, please join me in giving a big Brookings welcome to General Roger Turner. (Applause)

GENERAL TURNER: Well, good morning. And Michael, thank you for the gracious introduction. And I'd really just like to thank the whole Brookings team for really just being welcoming hosts to us this morning.

I'd like just to take a second just to introduce a couple members of my team that are important, and you may have some questions for them. First, Nazir Ahmed here. Nazir was our cultural advisor and he's got about seven or eight years in the Helmand Province and just obviously recently returned. So if you're writing about Helmand or researching about Helmand and you're not talking to Nazir, you're missing a golden primary source and so I would offer that.

And then Captain Hill Hamrick, who was aide-de-camp, but also is an intelligence officer and was key to the team between these two and our ability

to interface with the Afghan leaders and kind of connect to the lead elements and the like. Really greatly increased our effectiveness and so I'm indebted to those two individuals.

The rest of the team has now been disestablished and has moved back to other things as we were relieved by another Marine task force. So Task Force Southwest, which we were part of, still exists and they're are about 60 or 70 days in. And the good part of that is they've been able to maintain or even increase some of the successes that we saw. And I'll make comments with that in mind because certainly our contribution was not unique and it's been sustained based on Brigadier General Watson, who is now the commander there.

Okay. So what I hope to do today is to kind of maybe ramp down a level. There's obviously a lot of discussion about the South Asia Strategy. There's been lots of discussion of late as the Secretary and the Chairman and General Nicholson have been kind of talking about where we are six months into the South Asia Strategy and about a year into some of the changes that have been made in Afghanistan and really kind of where we are with that. So what I'm going to try to do is bring it down a level to talk at kind of the tactical level and how tactical success in Helmand connects to operational objectives for both the alliance and for the United States in particular. So we'll kind of touch on that.

There's also a lot of discussion about kind of partnered operations and by, with, and through is kind of the popular vernacular. So, you know, by a partner, with a partner, through a partner. But part of the piece on that is nobody knows like, hey, what's under the hood of that? Right? What's the method of

that? How do you do that? How do you actually create capability by, with, and through a partner? So I'll spend a little bit of time on that because I think it's important now, like strategically as we face a possibility now of great power war, great power competition. And we also have important regional actors that are serious threats to us. But the violent extremists problem's not going away.

So how can we address violent extremists and groups that are going to take advantage of these ungoverned spaces? How do we do that in a way that's sustainable for the military and also sustainable for the economy, and then be able to tackle the violent extremist problem, but then still have the capability to go after regional actors, if necessary, or compete at the strategic level, if necessary. So I'll just kind of ask that as foreshadowing. And we get through it, there may be some things that you want to bring up at the question-and-answer period.

Okay. I will also caveat that really my experience has only been Helmand in Afghanistan. So I served there as a colonel, as a regimental commander, 2011 and 2012 and then again just now. So I really can't speak at all about what's going on in Kandahar, what's going on in Kabul, you know, the effects of the National Unity government except for where it connects to Helmand and really that piece. So I can't speak of the country as a whole, so that'll be important as we kind of get into the Q&A and the like.

So I think the bottom line up front really is that we're seeing great success in Helmand over the last year. So we deployed last April and got into the situation there, and over the course of time we were able to effectively enable

our partner to steal the initiative from the Taliban. And really, once that initiative was taken, our Afghan partners were keen to maintain it and they've maintained a pretty incredible tempo against the enemy and I'll show you some of the results of that. And they, with our help, have really put the Taliban on the back foot, which is really critical.

All right, so let me kind of get into -- I want to just touch -- for those that aren't familiar, I just need to spend just a minute on orientation, so I'll do that briefly. So the area in red lined out was our area of operations, so Helmand Province on the right side of that, the Nimruz Province on the left. And that's about 2- or 300 miles from Kandahar -- I'm sorry, from Kabul and about 60 or 70 miles from Kandahar; and bordered by Iran on the west, Pakistan on the south, and then kind of connecting into the mountainous areas.

The next slide really shows you the Helmand Province, not the whole thing, but really the key areas. So Helmand and Nimruz are different than the rest of the country, so most people conjure mountainous and things like that when they think about Afghanistan and snow and things like that. It's not that. It's very flat, very, very dry desert with the exception of the green areas, which is really the prominent feature and the lifeblood of the area is the Helmand River. So running north to south, starting up in Kajaki, coming down through Gereshk to Lashkar Gah, down through Nawa and Garm Ser, and then it hooks and it goes in and that water ends up in Iran, which is obviously key to some of the agreements that the government of Afghanistan has with Iran on the water rights and that sort of thing.

Most of you are also aware about the USAID project that the greatly expanded the arable terrain in Helmand Province. It was built in the '50s and '60s, so the Kajaki Dam and then the canal project, so it probably quadrupled the size. I mean, the Helmand River would have just gone and been a little sliver of irrigation through the province and would have been just basically flood irrigated by locals and the like. But the USAID project, it was built and it still works and it still maintains -- really greatly enhanced the amount of arable land in the province and that became important. And so that's kind of -- you know, that's one of the reasons.

And then the population in Helmand, obviously Lashkar Gah is the capital. Gereshk is also the other major urban area. But we'll talk more about Central Helmand. Central Helmand is the most important to the government of Afghanistan and we'll talk a lot about that because that was absolutely our focus area, right. Lashkar Gah, Nad'Ali, Gereshk, Marjah, Nawa, that was really our focus because that's the most important piece. That's where most of the population lives. That's where the universities are, the hospitals are, the airports, the roads, and things like that. So that's the most important bit.

Next, I think it's important we just kind of a brief piece on the history here and why Helmand is important and kind of what the history of our involvement has been there. And again, I won't go through a lot of it, but Helmand is important because Helmand and Kandahar, that's where the Taliban get their start. So just a little bit to the east of Lashkar Gah as you move towards Maiwand and the like, that's where the Taliban was founded and that really

became their home. And a lot of the Taliban leadership even today are Helmandis, and so Helmand is a power base for the Taliban.

Also, the 9-11 attacks were trained and ordered from Helmand and Kandahar. So this is where the pre-9-11 conditions that gave us 9-11 attacks and the like, it emanates right from here, as well.

The history of our military involvement there has been significant, and I won't go through the whole thing. But between 2010 and 2014, there was about 30,000 coalition forces in Helmand Province, so about 20,000 Marines and about 10,000 Brits as part of the ISAF mission. And we enjoyed great success in Helmand during those years, and so that's kind of where we sat at that point.

But as you all know well, the previous strategy was a time-based strategy rather than a conditions-based strategy. So that basically had all coalition forces were removed from the Helmand Province in 2014. And that was based on, obviously, the numbers of forces that were going to be allowed to stay in Afghanistan. And then because of the location here it was unsupportable to keep coalition forces in Helmand, and so that pulled back. And then what happens then is a fairly rapid deterioration of the forces, which then leads to our going back last April.

So we showed up there last April and we really found that our Afghan partners were completely on the defensive and really demoralized. They had kind of suffered defeat after defeat. They didn't feel like they were being supported by the government or anybody else. And so they were in great difficulty.

But what we did have that was important was the Afghan government had inserted some new leadership, so a new corps commander, a new governor, provincial governor, and also a new zone commander. And the zone is like the MOI forces, the Minister of Interior forces, that are there. And then coupled with our capability. So we come in with a purpose-built force that was built from the ground up to train, advise, and assist our Afghan partners, to help the Afghan government expand population control, and also pressurize the Taliban.

So what unfolds over the next year is that the Afghan leaders that we worked with, they were unwilling to accept the status quo, which was really -- they were really just fortified up around Lashkar Gah and Gereshk, totally on the defensive. And the Taliban pretty much had the rest of the province, most of the green areas that you see up there. Airports were closed down. The roads were mostly impassable. So the situation was really bad.

But the Afghan leaders that we were working with, they weren't willing to accept that and they wanted to do better. And then once we coupled with our ability to effectively enable them, they really stole the initiative from the Taliban starting in about May of last year. And then once they stole the initiative, they maintained it. And we were able to kind of convince them and they realized that they were -- you know, by holding the initiative and by using tempo as a weapon, they could outpace and outcycle the Taliban. And they were much more successful and they took far less casualties employing their forces that way as opposed to letting the Taliban pick the time and place of an attack.

So the other thing that's important here is that the Taliban in 2017, I think some of you may have seen it, they came out publicly, they called it Operation Mansouri, and it was essentially their operational plan for last year. In that they said we're going to take the rest of the Helmand Province and we're going to take Lashkar Gah and Gereshk and we're going to make Lashkar Gah the capital of the caliphate in Afghanistan. So that's their stated goals and they come out with that very publicly in May.

But what we find instead is that they're losing terrain and they're ineffective. So they're not only not achieving their goals, they're losing terrain really critical to that, which was a great blow to them, and we'll talk more about that, as well.

All right. Really four key lessons that we learned during our time there. So I'll talk about these briefly and we can talk more about them in the question-and-answer.

But Afghan forces -- and when we say "Afghan forces" we're talking about not just the army, but the police, as well -- if they're properly enabled, and I put that in bold because that's really critical, properly enabled, can and will defeat the Taliban's point of attack. We found that over and over again, and they demonstrated that capability, so properly enabled, and we'll talk more about what that looks like.

For us the Afghan center of gravity is their confidence and their willingness to conduct offensive operations, so we viewed their confidence. So at first it was very low and they didn't think they could win and they didn't think

they had the capability to beat the Taliban. As they started to do it and as they became more effective, they became increasingly bold and increasingly ambitious, and that had basically a synergistic effect on the problems set forth. But we viewed their confidence as the most important thing. So it wasn't necessarily their capability or how much combat power they could bring. It was the confidence that was the most important thing.

And then advising activity. The way I view it it's really a non-kinetic effect. So U.S. advisors or coalition advisors, when they're with a partnered force they change the dynamic ,so it changes the environment. And, you know, we have to recognize that piece. But then if you talk about advising activity there's really three big buckets that people will talk about. So advisors can enhance a partner's warfighting capability, you can build the partner's capacity, and you can generate forces. So those are typically the three big buckets of advising activity. And this is not only for the Afghan problem set, this is like any place where we're conducting advising activity.

Far and away, we prioritize the ability to enhance the partner's warfighting capability as the most important thing. So that's like their intelligence capability, their maneuver capability, their logistics capability, their command and control capability. Our ability to make that better was the most important advising activity we did.

And then last is accompanying Afghan forces on missions can reverse momentum of the campaign and actually create a dependency on U.S. forces. We found our Afghan partners quite willing to go forward and fight for

their country. And they didn't need nor want Americans by their side. They were quite willing to do it if properly enabled. And if confident, right? So it was kind of a piece we had to kind of step into.

So we built their confidence by demonstrating capability. As they became more confident, they became increasingly ambitious. As they became more ambitious, they opened the Taliban up to additional targeting from us and from Afghan forces. So the whole thing kind of comes together. So I would ask you as you kind of like think through this problem, don't be a reductionist and try to say, well, it's all about the fires or all about the authorities or it's all about the rules of engagement or it's all about the capability. It's not that, it's all of it, right, as it all kind of comes together.

Okay. And I'll just touch on this briefly. This map represents Central Helmand, so you can see Lashkar Gah up in the center, Nad'Ali, Gereshk, Shorabak off to the west. That's where we were located.

So, again, this is the most important bit. So if you ask the Afghan governor or you ask the corps commander or you ask the MOI commanders that are there, Central Helmand is their focus because of all the reasons that I talked about before.

The dotted line up there kind of represents what's the line of control of the Afghan forces right now. Since we left, our replacements and the Afghan leaders that are still there have actually expanded this a little bit beyond where it is now, but this is kind of where the Afghan government controls. And when we got there the Taliban were very much trying to hold terrain and they

were very much trying to govern, which was different than our previous experience.

Since we've left they have morphed a little bit because they're realizing that they don't really have the ability to govern and hold terrain against the capability that the Afghan forces now have. So that's what that looks like.

What's probably important, again, is if you look on the southern part, so from Lashkar Gah to the south, you'll see the Nawa District. Some of you guys are probably familiar with Nawa. It's a very important district, very traditional Afghan, it's very homogenous tribally, and has traditionally supported the government. And the Taliban held the Nawa District for about a year and a half, I believe. And early in the campaign we were able to, working with our Afghan partners, to take back the Nawa District. And some of those pictures I know are probably hard to see show the Afghans taking down the Taliban flags and raising the Afghan flags on that district. It's a very large district, it's very important. It also was key to facilitating some of the roads and the airports and things like that reopening.

But really it became, in kind of Marine parlance, it really became kind of a Guadalcanal moment, similar to the way that Guadalcanal was the first victory in the Pacific in World War II. The Nawa District represented an Afghan success in 2017 in the face of Op Mansouri when the Taliban had said that we're going to take Lashkar Gah, we're going to take the rest of Helmand Province, and we're going to make Lashkar Gah the capital of the caliphate, but then they're losing the Nawa District right in the face of that. So it was very important

tangibly and also the information effect it had on the enemy was really critical, as well.

All right. So this is just kind of as I discussed earlier, like okay, so by, with, and through partnered operations, you hear a lot of talk about that. What does it look like and what's under the hood? How do you do it?

So first and foremost, our approach was it was Afghan led. So we never imposed our objectives on any of these missions. It was the Afghans saying we want to go here, we want to go to Nad'Ali, and we want to do it on this date, and then they would kind of all line up and that. And then the advisors and our Afghan partners would all work together to develop a plan that was going to be executable and have the effect that we wanted.

And from my perspective if the Afghans were achieving an objective that they wanted, as long as it achieved my objectives, as well, then we completely supported it. So everything worked really well on that.

So there would be a couple of weeks usually that would take place to kind of get one of these operations together. And then on game day it would look something like this, what's on the slide. So on the bottom left there it just kind of represents an Afghan maneuver element that would be out there. And this would typically be Afghan army, Afghan police, Afghan intelligence, you know, forces that would be maneuvering.

And then our advisors would be plugged in at as many Afghan command nodes as we could get on. And that's key to like the capacity of the force and some of that, I know you are aware, that some of the forces are

increasing there. The more places you can touch and the more command-and-control nodes that you can put advisors at, then the greater ability you have to sense what your partner's capabilities are and kind of react to it. So we would plug our advisors in to that. And then, obviously, that's plugged into our Joint Operations System that's on the top.

And then out in front there, we would be using a mix of Afghan intelligence-gathering capabilities and American intelligence-gathering capabilities. But we would blend their intelligence capabilities with ours and they'd be very much -- it wasn't like that we had the most information and it was about trying to share it with them. A lot of time it was the other way around. They knew far more than we did. We just had to kind of leverage that and use our assets without our capabilities.

And then we had a number of fires assets that we would bring to bear. We also had Afghan capabilities, so they have the MB-530 aircraft, they have A-29s. We would integrate them into the fight. We would try to pursue Afghan solutions first, and we saw those increase over time. And then we had a number of American fire support assets; in this case AH-64s, F-16s, B-52s, and the like. And that's where the authorities and that's where the capabilities are important for us to be able to do it.

But with this methodology here, we were able to create an overmatch that the Afghan government forces could beat the Taliban with this system any day of the week. And they did it over and over again. And I talked about tempo, so I think we were there about 280 days. I think about 250 days

they conducted an operation that looked something like this, often in multiple places in the province simultaneously. So we were often very challenged just to try to support our partners because as they became increasingly confident and increasingly ambitious, their tempo was impressive and it was difficult for us even to keep up.

So that's the -- and again, that's under the hood and we can talk more about this if you have additional questions. So I think that's really what I wanted to offer as far as opening comments. But I think it's important that the South Asia Strategy that was announced last August, this is some of the effects that we're seeing. Our partners now are reassured that our presence is not time-based, it's conditions-based. That has an effect on our partner and it has an effect on the enemy. And I think we're starting to see the leading edge here that the Taliban now realize that in the face of an Afghan-enabled force that's effectively enabled, they're not going to be able to achieve the objectives that they have enunciated in the past.

So anyway, I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

(Applause)

MR. O'HANLON: Well, thank you. Encouraging to see and I think we all got a lot out of that. Let me just follow up with a couple of specifics, if I could.

GENERAL TURNER: Sure.

MR. O'HANLON: I know that Secretary Mattis has decided not to share as much information about how many districts are held by the government

and how many by the enemy. I have my qualms about holding back that data because it makes it harder for the rest of us to assess the campaign. So can you perhaps at least help us a little bit more quantitative with Helmand?

You mentioned a number of specific places where things had improved. Is there any number in your head about what percent of populated areas of Helmand is now back in government control and how far are we towards getting to the objective that's desired?

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah. I don't have a specific number in mind. I'd almost think it's -- because, Michael, you get into this thing about, okay, if the government controls the district center, but some areas of the district are still being contested, is it in or not? I mean, is it under control or not? So it's gets to be very difficult to define.

But I would say this. The effect that we were able to achieve in Central Helmand in particular now, like if you live Lashkar Gah now, you are confident that you can get back and forth to Kandahar without being attacked. If you want to take a flight to Kabul, the airport is open and you can fly back. The city is somewhat peaceful. Obviously, there's still attacks that do take place. So Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, things are functioning now in the province.

This time last year they were not. The roads were impassable. The airport was closed. So I think we were able to achieve some good effects, but there's still clearly work to be done.

Our belief is that about 60 percent of the population of Helmand lives in that Central Helmand bit. And I believe it's well within the Afghan

capability and capacity to secure that in the face of the current threat and if a threat goes down, then they'll have even more capability.

MR. O'HANLON: So, again, I don't want to push this point too far, but just notionally speaking, because you talked about how bad things were in Helmand before you arrived, at that point clearly, from what I'm hearing you say, probably less than a quarter of the population lived in a way that was relatively safe from Taliban interference or control. And today, maybe it's closer to 50 percent. Are those rough numbers wrong?

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah, I mean, I think that's probably close, the 50 percent number. But, again, it's hard to quantify, right, because like if you're in Central Gereshk right now things are very good. You know, as you drift out of there into the countryside, there may be a point where you would be in danger. So it's hard to understand exactly how that would look.

MR. O'HANLON: And you did all this with -- I mean, as you said, the Afghans did most of it. You helped them, but you did all of this with about 300 Marines in province, is that the right number? And that's going up to maybe 500?

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah. So we had 300 and those numbers crept up a little bit during our time there. And then the current force that's there now has more. So what it allows him to do that I couldn't do is he can actually -- he can persist at lower levels whereas I could go down there episodically for like an operation and then I had to pull my people back in order to do other tasks. He now has the ability to kind of project it to lower levels, so it's helpful.

MR. O'HANLON: So to just break that down without asking you to say anything more than you can say in open forum, out of several hundred Marines in Helmand roughly how many different teams and how many different locations? I mean, and if you need to be general, I understand, but qualitative more than quantitative.

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah. So I would say that he's got the ability now, General Watson, to persist at at least two or three additional locations that I couldn't, and then that gives him the capability to make progress faster. So what advising activities, like I said in the brief, it's a non-kinetic activity that allows us -- it changes the environment when they're there, so when advisors can plug in and persist at a certain level, you can make progress faster. And so that was where I had to do it episodically; he can do it persistently.

MR. O'HANLON: And you were at several locations yourself already?

GENERAL TURNER: Yes.

MR. O'HANLON: So he's had two or three more above that.

You showed a lot of American airpower and also some American artillery. But you mentioned that the Afghan air force is being built with the A-29 aircraft and others. If you had to project, I'm not sure there's a specific goal in mind, but can you give us a feel for over let's say the next two to three years if we keep on at this mission the way it's being done now, what additional fraction of the airpower can be provided by the Afghans themselves?

GENERAL TURNER: We saw a good success with it, so they

were most capable in the MB-530, which is an attack helicopter. And they had those resident inside the core and then they could bring those to bear, and so they had rockets and machine guns and they were able to support their maneuver forces with that. And then they also use the A-29 to do that.

And we were effective kind of working with them to getting them to do what we would consider to be like a frontline Afghan controller that would actually be directing aircraft from a front -- you know, in support of their maneuver, and so that was an effect.

So I think we saw it grow over time. It's still a difficult task, as you can imagine, as they're trying to grow air crews and maintainers and then also grow special skills, all simultaneously. So I think the work that's being done to increase the air force is important work.

And we're seeing them to be more and more effective, but it is difficult. The degree of specialization and maintainers and things like that, I mean, those are hard -- I mean, sometimes those are hard capabilities for us to maintain. Right? We're challenged even in the American military to try to maintain those high skills sets and compete with private industry and things like that. So they face that, as well, as they're trying to grow these capabilities from scratch.

MR. O'HANLON: Now, you mentioned that it's going to take a while to make this kind of headway and we need to recognize there's an importance to just saying we're there for the long haul. And one of the dilemmas we've had before is maybe pulling back a little too quickly and being too

calendar-based.

Other people, though, have also emphasized that part of the problem with working with the Afghan Security Forces is the amount of turnover and attrition. And so to what extent is your successor and then his successor and so on going to sort of have to keep reinventing the wheel? Or to what extent do you think we can actually make durable progress that we can just keep building on incrementally from one command and one year to another?

GENERAL TURNER: Right, right. Well, I think it starts with strategy first. So the enduring nature of the strategy is really important. It's really important to our partners that they know that we're going to be with them.

And then it's just like I was saying about kind of the aspect of winning. Winning for the Afghans it has positive impacts in other areas, too, right? So when they're winning and they think they're being successful, all of a sudden their attrition rates start to go down. They took like 40 percent less casualties in 2017 than they took the previous year. So less casualties, higher morale, and then now you don't have as much challenge to get your highly skilled people inside the forces because, you know, the problem is not as difficult. Right. So it's like winning begets winning, and so we saw a lot of that.

But there is still hard work to be done. Force generation, like I mentioned, is a key aspect. We prioritize warfighting function enhancement to give us offensive capability, but the tasks that we do on force generation are really important, as well. And so that's an important component of the mission that's being worked on all over Afghanistan, as well.

MR. O'HANLON: Let me ask two more questions, one about Pakistan and then one recognizing that you don't want to talk about the nationwide picture too much, I just still need to link this discussion to the broader question of the trajectory of the war. But you were bordering Pakistan and we know that historically a lot of the leaders of the Taliban have been based in Pakistan. That's been part of the problem, we haven't been able to get at them the way we'd like, and they can continue to try to recruit and motivate foot soldiers. I know some of the Taliban leadership in Helmand is probably in Helmand. Some of it may be in Spin Boldak or in -- the Quetta Shura over in Pakistan.

I wondered if you had -- I guess the way to the question to a point, have you seen any change in Pakistani cooperation or behavior or helpfulness in the months since President Trump has, like his predecessor, like many American commanders and ambassadors, asked the Pakistanis to help us more and stop playing as much of a double game as they historically have been doing?

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah. What I think -- the way I would try to answer that is the Taliban in Helmand couldn't exist without external support, and they get that external support from a number of the regional actors. A number of the regional actors have interests in there and certainly have malign influence in the province.

And then the second big component of Helmand is the poppy and the opium that's grown there also provides a lot of financing to the Taliban. So really the confluence of external support and the poppy production give the

Taliban a pretty consistent source of income that allow them to have men, weapons, and material to be able to kind of continue the fight.

So I think the components of our strategy to pressurize the regional players to cease support for the Taliban is a really important component because I believe that if the Afghans only had to deal with Taliban, they could deal with it. But the Taliban being enabled by regional actors creates -- that's probably the reason we need to be involved in supporting them still.

MR. O'HANLON: So whatever help Pakistan may be providing, we could still use a lot more. Is that a fair summary?

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah.

MR. O'HANLON: Now, President Ghani has been remarkable in some of his big ideas in recent months. He's a big thinker, we all know that. And one of them has to do with a new peace overture towards the Taliban and one of them has to do with the military campaign. And I want to ask you about the second and then we'll bring in others who may want to bring the rest of the topics back to discussion, as well. I'll leave the Taliban reconciliation efforts for later and for others to bring up.

But I wanted to ask about this goal of President Ghani that ideally within two or three years 80 percent of the country or its population would be back under the control of the government. Current unclassified U.S. estimates, of course, are that less than 60 percent of the population and territory are controlled by the government, roughly in the high 50s to 60 percent. That's down from maybe 70 percent when General Allen and General Dunford were in

command and we had a much larger U.S. military footprint. It was never 80 percent, I don't think, even in the days of the surge.

So how realistic is it and how necessary is it to get to that 80 percent nationwide goal, recognizing that you only want to speak primarily from your own experience in Helmand? But to what extent do you think that 80 percent goal is realistic?

GENERAL TURNER: I think the 80 percent number's important and I think we should drive towards that. I think that's a good goal that obviously President Ghani has articulated and we're supporting him as part of his four-year campaign plan.

But I also think it's important that we don't do anything that the Afghans don't have the capability to sustain. And I think some of the lessons from the surge is that forces that push the Taliban out of areas that then the Afghans didn't have the capability to sustain, that was very unhelpful for them as we withdrew our forces. So I think what we just need to consider is -- so those are good goals, but kind of consider the confluence between threat and Afghan capability and kind of how that -- you know, the interrelationship between those things.

So let's -- what can they do? What's sustainable? What's supportable? Rather than like letting the number, you know, drive us. Because if we just go after 80 percent of the population, but then they don't have the capability to hold it, then it would be unhelpful, right? So I really think it's kind of where is the intersection between threat, if we can buy down the Taliban threat

either through military effects or reconciliation, increase the Afghan capabilities, which is kind of what's part of the campaign, and then set the goal there, right? And I think that's what we just need to be very clear-eyed about that we don't do something that they can't sustain.

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic. Well, thank you, excellent answers, a lot of information, and I'm sure others want to get into this, too. So please, wait for a microphone and then identify yourself and we'll take a couple of questions at a time, if that's all right.

So we'll start up here in the front two rows, two gentlemen over here on the far side, take those together, please.

MR. MORGAN: Thanks, General Turner, for doing this. I'm Wes Morgan with POLITICO. Starting last November or so, we started hearing a lot from Resolute Support and General Nicholson about the new strikes using new authorities on the opium processing facilities and, you know, it's something that Resolute Support made a big deal out of. You mentioned two things that make me wonder about that. One, kind of not focusing on authorities as kind of the new thing; and then also, not doing things that the Afghans can't sustain.

So I was just wondering, based on this deployment and also your previous deployment to Helmand, what's your perspective on the importance of these counter-opium processing efforts? I know they're not being described as counter-narcotics efforts.

And also, you know, what did your partners make of it in the 215th Corps? What did they think was the importance of these new efforts?

MR. O'HANLON: Maybe it's easier to let you answer that one directly and then we'll go to Otto next.

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah, yeah. No, good. Thank you for that question. Those are important efforts.

So the authorities that we received allowed us to target Taliban financing, and really what was important is where we could see that there was a clear connection between opium production and Taliban. And so it's actually not hard to do that in Helmand because most of the Helmand-based Taliban are completely connected to the opium trade and that's really where they derive a lot of their support from. But anyway, it's an important component.

But what was important about it was the combined effect. So Afghan maneuver, like the operations we were supporting with an Afghan maneuver to seize terrain from the Taliban that was being supported, and that was one component. Special Operations Forces doing targeting, as well, so both Afghan independent operations and partnered operation with U.S. Special Forces was another component. And then you put the counternarcotic strikes on top of that.

So the three of those things together created a pretty significant effect on the Taliban and I think that's changed their -- our partners were quite keen to do it. They thought it was very important. And we had solid support from President Ghani and also Governor Hayat, who is the governor in the province. And then the Afghans even participated in this, to kind of speak to your question about sustainability. The Afghan air force participated in these strikes, as well.

MR. KREISHER: Good morning, General. Otto Kreisher, SEAPOWER Magazine. You the Army has created advise-and-assist brigades that they're sending into Afghanistan and Iraq. Was the force that you took with you, were they selectively -- picked selectively? And what kind of training did you get there so that you weren't sending just conventional grunts into that situation?

GENERAL TURNER: Sure.

MR. KREISHER: And your rank level, I assume you had more senior personnel than you normally would in an infantry company.

GENERAL TURNER: Right. No, thanks for that. So we did not have a specialized force, so we had a 300-man force. About half of that force was advisors and about half of it was not. So the half of it that wasn't is essentially additional capability and that's quite -- those are conventional outfits that you would be familiar with, like a rifle company and artillery and things like that.

MR. O'HANLON: Just to clarify, all your F-16s and so forth, they're coming from either Kandahar or further away, so they're not part of your 300.

GENERAL TURNER: That's right. But the advising effort, so we drew officers and staff, noncommissioned officers, from across -- the whole force came out of II MEF at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. They all came out of there. And they were all kind of MOS-qualified Marines. Some of them had previous advising experience, but a lot didn't.

And so honestly, the Marine Corps is building an advisor group

and we do have -- we are heading in that direction. But we took Marines and sailors who were essentially out of the conventional force and then did some training to bring them up to be able to conduct this. I actually think that in some cases we make way too much of this, that a lot of the capability is you need to be -- like if you're going to be an intelligence advisor, you need to be a really good intelligence officer or a staff NCO. You need to know your trade. You need to know like the processes that we use and all that kind of stuff.

And then a lot of the interactions that you have with your partners are relatively commonsense engagements. Right? I mean, the Afghans, you know, we easily strike common cause with our partners and build rapport and things like that. So a lot of the soft skills that I think people talk about a lot about advising, quite honestly I think we make way too much of it; that a lot of this is inherent in the force and it doesn't require a great deal of specialization. And that Marines and sailors and soldiers that we worked with in Afghanistan, they took to this easily and really performed well and produced some amazing effects.

SPEAKER: (inaudible) that you have beefed up interpreters?

GENERAL TURNER: Yes.

SPEAKER: Increased the level of interpreters so you can do the language?

GENERAL TURNER: Sure. Yeah, most of the interpreters or translators are -- they're run under a contract, so it's a mix of Afghan local hires and then also some of the higher end are fully U.S. citizens, fully cleared for high-level classifications and things like that. So that's mostly a contract piece.

And I think, you know, one of the dilemmas, right, if you're going to try to build a force with multiple language capabilities, that's a really difficult thing for us to do because in the Helmand Province, even the Afghan army speaks mostly Pashto because that's what the locals speak. And if you go to Kabul, they're speaking mostly Dari and things like that. Right? And so to build a language capability inside the conventional force that's going to allow this, that would be a very difficult thing for us to do.

MR. O'HANLON: By the way, you're seeing more ability to recruit from the Pashtun locals than we were able to achieve five, eight years ago?

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah, it's consistent on the police side, but they're still challenged on the Afghan army. And so really the forces that we employed were mostly Minister of Interior forces that were mostly Helmandis, and then the Afghan army is mostly from around the Kabul cluster, some from Kandahar and the like. But the combined forces that come together was what was powerful.

So often the police were very aggressive at the point of attack, knew the area, knew the locals really well, but then they wouldn't go unless the Afghan army was going to go with them to provide them the firepower and the muscle. Right? So it was kind of the combined effect where we saw our most success.

MR. O'HANLON: Great. Let's see, go to my friend in the back about the 10th row, a couple rows up. Yeah.

MR. BROOKS: Hi, General, thanks for the presentation. Doug

Brooks from the Afghan-American Chamber of Commerce. Two quick questions.

One, are the Afghans able to get their goods to Kabul or to the markets using the roads? Is that all opened up in Helmand Province?

And second of all, where are the Taliban getting their weapons from? You must have been able to track where they've been produced, how old they are, where's the ammunition coming from. We must have some information on this, but I've not seen anything on it.

GENERAL TURNER: Thanks for that. The roads are obviously important for people to be able to move goods and services, so the Ring Road that goes between Kandahar, between Gereshk, and then towards points west is fully trafficable and it's like traffic nonstop on it and things like that. The other highways that would allow you to go from places like Nawa and Lashkar Gah towards Kandahar, those are now open and are not significantly challenged by the enemy. So the major population centers are connected for goods and services and people to move back and forth and things like that.

As you move into the more rural areas and stuff like that, then that's when there's going to be some challenges to those areas.

As far as men, weapons, and equipment -- or as far as weapons that flow to the Taliban, I think the most I could say would just be is I believe a lot of it comes from the regional actors. So the neighbors of Helmand and Nimruz provide equipment to the Taliban and some of that they probably provide willingly through just giving it to them and then others, they probably are buying it using the opium profits to use to purchase equipment.

MR. O'HANLON: Here on the right side, my right on the fifth row, please.

MS. HOUCK: Hi, General. Caroline Houck with Defense One. You mentioned that once the Afghan partner forces confidence increased, their desired tempo of operations almost outpaced your ability to provide support. Is that something that's going to be addressed as assets, particularly as assets are transferred from Iraq-Syria over to the Afghan fight or is that something more to do with your forces in the area? Thanks.

GENERAL TURNER: Thanks, great question. So, no, I expect that the current campaign, the 2018 campaign, has much more resources than what we had in 2017. So as you know, obviously the fight against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria was still going on during the time that we were doing our operations. So there was times that we didn't have enough and our Afghan partners, you know, kind of would get close occasionally to outpacing our ability to support them. I don't expect that's going to be a problem in the campaign now. So the campaign is well-resourced to really allow all of the attacks and task forces to kind of produce some of the capability that I was showing there. And I think that's going to really ratchet the pressure on the Taliban across all of Afghanistan.

MR. O'HANLON: Go to the gentleman here in about the seventh row.

MR. LEIBER: Hey, sir, Harrison Leiber, former 7th Marine Regiment. I had a question about the Afghans doing a mission on their own

without coalition support and using that as a basis to judge improvement. Is that something you guys are doing?

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah, sure. I mean, and there were plenty of times when they did that, when they did things completely on their own. And like I was saying, we wouldn't superimpose ourselves on it. If they were -- I mean, a good example would be medical. So I had the authorities to provide American medical support to Afghans, but we rarely used it. And so even if they suffered like a mass casualty event or something like that, they were pretty proud of their capability to use their MI-17s to go pick up casualties, fly them back to their hospitals, and then conduct surgery.

We would a lot of times send our doctors over there just to kind of see how they were doing and ask them again, like, hey, do you need us? We can bring people over to our camp and we can do surgery and things. And they're like, no, we're good, you know. So they're pretty proud of their capabilities, so we don't force ourselves into anything and so everything that we do, we ask do you want us to help you? And if they do, we do if we can.

But they're proud of their ability to do things themselves and anytime they could we let them run, for sure.

MR. O'HANLON: Quick follow-up from me on that and then we'll go -- go ahead, take your own follow-up first.

MR. LEIBER: Do you think any dependencies are forming then, like if we just wait long enough or if we just convey a certain level of weakness, the Marines will bring their F-16s?

GENERAL TURNER: Yeah. That's part of the art of advising, right? I mean, that's kind of the art of this is if you're going to do it for them all the time, then they'll let you. Right? And the Afghans aren't unique in this. I think this is probably in any sort of relationship. We have tremendous capabilities and capacities in our forces and, you know, great weapons systems and things like that. So if you're going to absolutely do it for them, they'll let you. Right? But the art of advising is to kind of increase that kind of be wary of, okay, if I do this, am I building a dependency? And what is the second and third order effects of that?

But again, we kind of looked at confidence as, like I said, like the center of gravity. The most important thing is their confidence, so we need to do enough to make them successful in this, but not go overboard or whatever. And if they had the capability, like if MB-530s were going to come support a maneuver type of thing, we would just stay out of it and let them do it. And if they achieved the success themselves, then they were even more confident. Right? And so we wouldn't -- and then we would use our assets other places and things like that.

MR. O'HANLON: A question on Afghan casualties. One of the concerns in recent years has been the high level of Afghan fatalities in their police and their army. And the estimates have usually not been volunteered in a comprehensive way by ISAF or its successor commands. But they've been estimated in the range of 5,000 to 10,000 killed in action nationwide per year among Afghan forces. I don't want to ask you about nationwide trends, but do

you see any improvements in those numbers in Helmand such that the casualties may be declining over time, one would hope, and thereby make it more possible to keep building up the army and police with less turnover, less loss?

GENERAL TURNER: Sure. And we saw about a 40 percent reduction in casualties in 2017 in the Afghan National Army that's stationed in Helmand. So the 215th Corps had about a 40 percent reduction in casualties.

But then again, there's a big synergy piece to this, too, right? So also their AWOL rates dropped significantly. They would send soldiers on leave and then soldiers would come back. Right? So, you know, a lot of this is just if a soldier knows that he's not going to be supported and he's likely going to be left to die in Helmand Province, if he gets a chance to go on leave he's not going to come back. And so as they became successful, now they send that soldier on leave and he actually comes back from leave and continues on.

So it's not just casualties. I think it's the AWOL rates, it's the morale factor. Some of those are difficult to measure, but we definitely saw that increase.

MR. O'HANLON: Excellent. We have time for one or two more questions, so let's go about to the -- right in front of you, yeah, to the sixth row here. Then we'll come up front.

MS. GRAY: Sir, good morning, thank you for your time. Carrie Gray, representing myself today. Leveraging Harrison's question, you talked about how the strategy's improving, their confidence is increasing. We're seeing results and we're often supporting their decisions. Can you talk about a time

where there might have been a disagreement, what that looked like, how it was solved, and maybe how it affected the lower level of commanders?

GENERAL TURNER: Sure. We didn't -- we weren't successful without having the Afghans kind of all agree on the objective. So it would typically be that the governor, the corps commander, the zone commander, kind of the collective group of generals and the governor all come together saying this is the objective and this is the most important thing.

If that all lined up, we would hit a home run like every time. If there was a difference of opinion amongst the Afghans, then they would be like, well, this is really important for the army, but the police don't really agree. And in some cases, we still tried to make things work like that, but we very rarely succeeded unless there was a confluence of direction from them.

So kind of what we consider the Afghan pillars, which really is the Minister of Interior, the army, and the government, when they're all together in like a triad, then you have a very high chance of achieving success and producing a lot of combat power. If there's disagreement there, then a very low chance of succeeding.

MR. O'HANLON: I think we'll take one last question up here in the very front row and then we'll have to wrap it up, please.

MS. FAZEL: Thank you very much. I'm Marina Fazel, an Afghan-American journalist. I would like to have two questions addressed.

There's been along the years, obviously, a lot of talk about where the Taliban are getting military support, weaponry mainly. Recently there have

been more allegations that Russia is becoming much more assertively involved in this. I would like your comments on that.

In fact, Afghan media was recording one of the Russian representatives having a laugh at this, and saying that it's actually from the Afghan military, that all they have to do is to give Afghan military the Taliban money. The Taliban just need money to go and buy the weapons from the Afghan military suggesting a level of corruption.

The other question is what would be your main recommendation to the Trump administration? If you had to condense -- you know, send a brief message while the Afghan population is anxious about its future with all the ups and downs of these many troops and not many troops at the height of it, as you mentioned, not really quite enough of a commitment to sustain a long-term stability for it to grow and then eventually become something that could be handed over to the Afghans for them to independently handle.

What would be your main recommendation to the Trump administration? What must be done to ensure stability in Afghanistan? Thanks.

GENERAL TURNER: Okay, thanks. Really good questions and I appreciate those.

As far as the Russian support, I don't know exactly like what -- what exactly they may or may not be involved in. We never had anything that we could directly attribute to them.

But what they do do I think that's unhelpful is they have a narrative that says, hey, we're -- that the Taliban is important to keep ISIS in check in

Afghanistan. And I think the Russians really overblow the ISIS presence in Afghanistan. It's very small and very ineffective, and the Russians kind of talk about that as a result that the Taliban is important, and that's unhelpful. It's unhelpful for the region, it's unhelpful for the government of Afghanistan, and it's unhelpful for the alliance.

The fat part of the problem is still the confluence of the opium production and external support by regional actors, and that's the fat part of the program in Helmand and the most important thing that we need to address.

As far as advice I would give just based on my time there would be is that it's going to require a long-term commitment to get the Afghan forces where they need to be. We need to buy down the Taliban's capabilities, so we need to reduce the Taliban's capability and increase the Afghan capability. And then we need to be committed to the long term.

But also, we need to do something that's affordable for our country and affordable for the alliance and the other donors. That all needs to be kept in -- so I think, like I said earlier, really the intersection between threat and capability and affordability, like we need to kind of set that, figure out what that level of investment needs to be in both resources and forces, and then we need to kind of stay with it until we've achieved a level of success.

MR. O'HANLON: I want to thank not only everybody on the team of General Turner, but also our own Lieutenant Colonel Gerald Graham and Ian Livingston and others who helped set this up. I don't think I've learned as much in 60 minutes in this auditorium in a long time. There was a lot of information and a lot

of hopefulness, so I really want to thank you for coming to Brookings, General.

(Applause)

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