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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Hi everyone. Welcome to Brookings. I'm Michael O'Hanlon, very briefly playing the role of MC, just to say hello, and welcome you before I hand the baton over to Tom Bowman of National Public Radio who will be our moderator today.

Tom is a very distinguished and accomplished NPR reporter, also Baltimore Sun before that. Really thrilled that he would join us. He spent a lot of time in the field in Afghanistan and elsewhere, embedded with U.S. combat units and other parts of the broader effort there that now of course is approaching the end of its second decade, pretty soon.

Next to Tom and before I hand the baton to him, I'll just introduce my co-panelists. Laurel Miller, who was the acting special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the State Department. Had numerous other jobs in that capacity in that organization as well. Has been at the Rand Corporation subsequently where she recently completed a co-authored 200-page study on a proposed Afghanistan peace concept, or peace agreement, written as sort of a simulated, or perhaps model agreement that parties themselves could perhaps consider.

Because even though we all are aware that an American is not going to write the ultimate peace deal, the parties themselves may benefit from a little bit of provocation. As we know that we've been talking about having a peace negotiation or a long time, but it's not clear how specific people have gotten in their overall concepts of what that would mean. So, thrilled to have here, she's now at the International Crisis Group, a remarkable organization that does research around the world as you know.

And speaking of remarkable, Vanda Felbab-Brown, my intrepid field researcher extraordinaire who has written a book on Afghanistan several years ago, but also studied transnational criminal networks and insurgencies around the world, currently working on a book on Mexico, but also has recently studied in Nigeria, where she's just back from field research and Indonesia and many other parts of the world. I'm just a huge fan of her bravery and brilliance as she studies these kinds of phenomena.

So, without further ado, Tom thanks for joining us and over to you.

MR. BOWMAN: Michael, thank you. Its great to be here and thanks for everyone for coming out. Afghanistan is back in the news, thanks partly to the Washington Post and its series,

Afghanistan Papers. So, I hope you have many questions, because we're going to be start calling on you very quickly.

And I want to start by asking Michael how he sees things right now with the peace talks with Alkalozad. And also talk a little bit about your proposal to have 5,000 troops in Afghanistan for the next five years. As some of you may know, there's talk about reducing the force in Afghanistan now currently about 13,000 down to about 8,600. That could happen sometime this week. But your plan says to go even lower to go to 5,000 for five years. Talk about that, why that number?

MR. O'HANLON: And on the peace talks I'll just say that Laurel and Vanda know more, and I'll just tee up and hopefully whet your appetite for what they're about to say. But I'm struck again that Laurel, writing this paper, and some of the thinking of Vanda, and some of her close colleagues have done. To me that's sort of the essence of what we've seen so far in substantive discussions about how to reach power sharing compromises, how to deal with Taliban set of forces, and an Afghanistan set of forces that have no interest in working together right now. They're actually still pretty bitter enemies in the field.

So, I think peace is a long ways off, is my bottom line. And I hope I'm wrong. But in the meantime, therefore I think we need a concept that Americans can discuss, debate and hopefully settle on to some extent for the new Presidency. And at a time I first decided to write this 5,000 troops for five years concept when President Trump was again talking about pulling out of Syria completely, and maybe turning his gaze next to Afghanistan.

And when Democrats were criticizing Trump for his fecklessness and his recklessness in talking about these foreign commitments. And yet I sort of sensed that Democrats didn't really want to commit to a long-lasting Afghanistan presence either. Everyone sort of hopes we pull something out of a hat and get a peace deal that allows us to go home without defeat. But I don't think that's very likely.

So, the 5,000 for five years concept is a way to sort of take the drama out of Afghanistan policy and say let's just try to have about the same size presence in Afghanistan that we have in Iraq. And let's gradually go down to that number. I'm not suggesting we should do it the first week of the new Presidential term, whether it's a Democrat or reelected President Trump.

But that could sort of be a conceptual framework that would allow us to keep two or three

major bases, Bagram Air Base near Cabo, a base in the south around Kandahar, and then perhaps at least initially one or two in the east, maybe Jalalabad and Host. And that would create the kind of major footprint that allows us to do intelligence gathering, airpower strikes of which we still do a lot. And this year has, I think, been the most since 2012 or so.

And so this would allow us to sustain the Afghan forces in the help they need most, but continue to leave most of the fighting to them, as we've already been doing frankly now for the better part of half a decade.

So, that's the basic logic of the concept. Give a floor below which we're not going to go unless there's a peace do. You know, suggest that we glide down to that floor over the next couple of year. And then stop having these annual reviews in Washington that takes so much time and energy from senior policymakers and dramatize and elevate Afghanistan almost too much in our national security discourse. That's the basic concept.

MR. BOWMAN: Yeah great. And Laurel, let's turn to you now. You've come out with a report on a peace plan. Talk a little bit about that. And also, do you think peace is a long way off? Maybe the peace deal could come soon, but actual peace is a long way off. Do you agree?

MS. MILLER: I think a genuine peace process that grapples with all the very difficult issues of how to govern Afghanistan, how to secure Afghanistan, is a ways off. But that doesn't mean that a peace process has to be a long way off.

And having a process underway that brings the sides together into genuine negotiations, can have a positive effect on reducing violence in and of itself. And is worth doing. And in my view worth staying for militarily and diplomatically engaged in Afghanistan for some period of time to give it a real shot.

Where were my analysis differs from Michael's is that I don't think that given that we've all now seemed to digest the idea that the United States is not going to win the war, that a second best and satisfactory option is to just keep it going for some indefinite period of time or some -- specify a number of years period of time.

I don't think that's truly sustainable politically in the United States. I don't think it's sustainable, even operationally for an indefinite period of time. And it certainly doesn't do anything for the

Afghan people who are greatly desirous of peace.

What I've done in my report is tried to paint a picture of what the substance of an outcome of a piece of negotiation might look like. It's a set of ideas and options and alternatives that's intended to help fill in some of the gaps, and thinking, and analysis of what the substance of peace could look like.

And I think when you look at it, you see why a peace process will take a while and why it will be difficult to do, because these are issues that are going to be very contentious. But you also see that Afghanistan, although complicated, isn't so much more complicated than a lot of other places around the world that have had peace processes, some of which have actually produced a result. That the kinds of issues and the kinds of possible solutions are ones that have been explored in other peace processes and occasionally succeeded in bringing down levels of violence.

MR. BOWMAN: Now, the Taliban have repeatedly said they want all troops out, all international troops out of Afghanistan. Your plan calls for some sort of a residual force that would be going after terrorists, ISIS and so forth. Talk a little bit about how that -- how you envision that kind of a force.

MS. MILLER: Yeah. So, I've included the idea of potentially having some kind of residual international military element that would continue counterterrorism efforts working with Afghans. Whether that could actually be led by Americans, I think is somewhat questionable. And I'm by no means certain that you could get Taliban agreement to such a residual, for certainly not at the outset of a negotiation. I don't think you could enter into a negotiation assuming you could get that as an outcome.

But I think it's something that you could try to get as an outcome of a peace negotiation. But I do think there's a hard question for U.S. policymakers as to whether that's a must have element of the peace process, or great if we can get it element of a peace process. Because I don't think it's certain that the -- that you could get that through a peace --

MR. BOWMAN: And the Pentagon has repeatedly said that they would like some sort of residual force.

MS. MILLER: Yeah.

MR. BOWMAN: To remain in the country. Well Vanda what about that? You've been

recently in Afghanistan talking to the Taliban. Would they accept some sort of a residual force, do you think?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well so first of all, I need to say that out, of course, many members of the Taliban and to the extent that I was able to speak with individuals, it's not at all clear how close they are to the (inaudible). It's also very important to understand that the Taliban is talking to tremendous amount of people. In fact, to just about all the power brokers except members of the President (inaudible) and Dr. Abdullah's government.

And they tend to tell to people what they want to hear. So, same individuals or same factions will tailor messages very much on the basis of what they expect the audience to hear. That said, with this preface, and the need to understand that we are very much, we the international community, is very much operating in a very opaque environment where preferences are not clear and not stated. There have been some consistencies.

One of the most significant, most striking that mentions from the conversations I had, was that the Taliban members were systematically expressing the disastrous outcome would be for the United States to withdraw, without a deal with them. So, they still very much want that the U.S. strikes a deal and they very much like that Ambassador Khalilzad achieved by the end of August and then President Trump canceled. For them, that's still the starting point of any further talk, and more or less the end of what they envision the talk.

They are, however, very unhappy about the possibility of U.S. withdrawing its forces without the deal with them, fearing this greatly augments the chance for civil war in Afghanistan that they very much want to avoid.

MR. BOWMAN: Now, some of the military people I talk with over in Afghanistan say that the U.S. leverage is the money to keep the country going. That if all U.S. troops leave, the money leaves with them. Talk about the Taliban. Do they talk about that --

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Oh absolutely.

MR. BOWMAN: -- about all U.S.A leaving?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Oh absolutely. And that's another issue that they are very focused on, with really quite consistent messaging across large numbers of interlocutors that it would be

disastrous for the United States to liquidate its socioeconomic accomplishments in Afghanistan. And eliminate aid once they are in power.

And they definitely believe that they will be in power, although they will make the argument that they will share power in some form with someone. And the in some form is really the crux of all the difficulties in the negotiations that will be the -- really the hardest part.

But nonetheless, they assume that they will be in power to some extent in some form, they will share power. And they're also rather clear that they do not want to repeat the 1990's, including the economic socioeconomic collapse in the country.

And so they message very clearly by pointing examples to Saudi Arabia and say, look United States, you have such a great relationship with Saudi Arabia. We perfectly want the regime like Saudi Arabia, we would be very happy with the regime like this. So, we and you could be friends after you made the deal with us and your forces leave. And you should keep the money flowing.

And indeed, in my views, the -- really the long term, or not even long term, the grappling that the United States needs to, and the international community needs to deal with, is not just how do we get to a peace deal? How do we get to significant reduction of conflict?

But how do we then shape the behavior of our brokers, one of which will be the Taliban, quite likely in power in some form? What kind of leverage will we have, so that we do not see really catastrophic loss of human rights and freedom, so that there is some accountability in the country and some respect for human rights? And I very specifically say some, because under the current situation is problematic and it's likely to see significant deterioration after the peace deal.

I wish that the peace deal could be the way the Afghan government envision it. Essentially a replica of the Colombian deal in which the Taliban gets minimal penalties and just agrees to demobilize and have five seats in the Afghan parliament. The Afghan government still puts that forth as the model they want. They bring in Colombian advisors constantly to explain the Colombian process. I think it's completely unrealistic. This is just not the way the deal would look like.

MR. BOWMAN: And talk a little bit about the Taliban. If all U.S. troops leave, or even if there's a residual force, do you think the Taliban have enough power to actually take over the country again?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well they --

MR. BOWMAN: You can each jump in on that point.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: I would say they don't, and they are well aware of it. That's why they are so leery of us leaving without having a deal with them, a deal that positions them well to have significant power in a transitional government and more than transitional government. So, they are well aware that they -- the security is the worst it's been from many dimensions, the level of Taliban influence is very significant.

You can go to liberated districts and 20 miles out, over three kilometers out to deliberate the district. The Taliban is there and government officials will not go there. In three districts government officials might be absolutely hunkered down to just the office, and have 40 bodyguards and not dare to step out of the office because of the level of Taliban presence.

But that said, the Taliban is well aware they cannot just take the country. And that they will face a civil war that will be very fragmented civil war that could erupt in the south. There are important Southern power brokers who can become significant military obstacle. And that they will have capacities in the north. It's not going to be the line moving more and more north past the Somali Plane.

So, they want to avoid that. The war is stalled, but it's stalled in a way that gives gradual small accretion of power to the Taliban.

MR. BOWMAN: Okay.

MS. MILLER: I would just add. I mean, I largely agree with that. There's no question that if the United States left tomorrow that the Taliban would seek to take advantage of that. But there would be very strong opposition to the Taliban as well --

MR. BOWMAN: So, likely a civil war?

MS. MILLER: Likely and intensified and more multi-sided civil war than you see now. It's also why I find it quite worrisome that some on the Afghan government side seem to be thinking that they'd be better off with an American departure and no peace deal compromising with the Taliban, if that's a choice they had to make, then going ahead with compromising with the Taliban.

MR. BOWMAN: Mike do you anything to add?

MR. O'HANLON: Well yeah I agree 100 percent. But just to build on that point. I

mentioned earlier, we all know that the United States has used more ordinance in Afghanistan this last year to -- than all through the 2010 decade, except the very beginning of it.

That's extraordinary. And it shows that the Afghan army still needs a lot of help. Even though they're doing most of the fighting and dying. And we only have, again at this point 15 percent the number of people we had at peak. They are not ready to hold on.

On the other hand, they do have all the major cities, 60 plus percent of the population lives under government protection of one type or another, however imperfect. The U.S. government stopped providing these kinds of statistics, and the statistics are probably, you know, a lot more uncertain than I just made them sound anyway.

But at present, the Taliban is so far away from winning this war that I'm really glad that Laurel and Vanda, you know, emphasized the point, they would not be the automatic and immediate victories if we pulled out. Especially if we kept some of the security assistance flowing.

So, I, yeah, I think the most likely thing is either a hodgepodge of different smaller cities gradually falling into Taliban control in different parts of the south and the north, and the west. But the government holding on to other parts. Or ultimately, you could imagine more of an ethnically based breakdown Pashtun versus Tajik, with a lot of ethnic cleansing, you know, to each side help consolidate their own territories. I hope it never comes to that, of course. But you could imagine that as well. Those are the kinds of outcomes as opposed to a complete Taliban takeover.

MR. BOWMAN: Now, I would like you to each address this question I've been asking people, really for the last several years, senior people, military people, civilian. That how would you do it differently? Let's say the towers come down, the 9-11 attacks happen. Military goes to Afghanistan, overthrows the Taliban. Each of you is in charge of this effort. Tell me what your plan is.

MR. O'HANLON: I go first?

MR. BOWMAN: Yes.

MR. O'HANLON: So, I'll start with the early chronology. I think that -- and I'm not really being too harsh on the Bush Administration when I say this, because everybody says they were distracted by Iraq, they didn't care about Afghanistan. But frankly, nobody cared about Afghanistan. Once we got rid of the Taliban, there was not a hue and cry from any part of the American debate, or

Europe, that we should go in and do sort of a medium footprint strategy and try to build up Afghan institutions in what proved to be sort of a golden window of '02 to '06 when the Taliban was not really fighting.

That was the missed opportunity above all others in my judgment. Because if you had built reasonably competent army and police in that period of time, and tried to reach out perhaps to some more Talibani elements, and be more inclusive and more inclined towards amnesty for some of them, I think you could have built a society that sort of functioned and didn't create the huge opportunity for a Taliban resurgence by '07, '08, '09.

That's the fundamental thing that -- the fundamental opportunity I think we missed. And again, I'm not really trying to be overly harsh on the Bush Administration, because I wasn't advocating it myself at that time. I was distracted by Iraq, and by Homeland Security, and by all the other things. So, it's not accusatory, but as I look back that was the number one missed opportunity.

MR. BOWMAN: Laurel, you're in charge.

MS. MILLER: Yeah, you know, I don't think that it would have been realistic to build up the Afghan security forces, or governance capacity really much more quickly or more effectively than was done. I just think there are natural limits on the ability to do those kinds of things in societies that are as poor and as institutionally undeveloped as Afghanistan.

The key thing is that period from 2002 to around 2005, preventing the insurgency from taking hold, from developing, would have required political outreach to Taliban individuals. I don't say the Taliban as an organization as such because it had lost some organizational integrity. Now, --

MR. BOWMAN: Was that a mistake not reaching out to the Taliban early on?

MS. MILLER: It was absolutely -- I mean, it was absolutely a mistake. It was not a mistake that was -- it was not, I don't believe from people I've talked to, an explicitly considered and rejected policy choice by the Bush Administration. Because the viewpoint at that time was, what Taliban, we've swept them away. There are no more Taliban.

But there were people who understood Afghanistan better than that, who knew that you were risking the rise of an insurgency if you didn't deal with that. Nevertheless --

MR. BOWMAN: Rumsfeld, of course, said we'll bring the Taliban the justice, or justice to

the Taliban.

MS. MILLER: Yeah.

MR. BOWMAN: In early '02.

MS. MILLER: Yes. I mean there was --

MR. BOWMAN: So, --

MS. MILLER: There was really the idea that the Bush Administration, given that orientation, would have reached out is somewhat implausible. But let's even set that aside, there were many opportunities over the last decade to be more serious about trying to negotiate with the Taliban. And to have done that at the height of American power in Afghanistan, at the time of the surge, would have made a lot more sense than doing it at this low point of American power in Afghanistan that we're at now.

MR. BOWMAN: Vanda?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, I will add to the issue of reaching out early and reaching out at the peak of power before the surge, and before the limitations of what the surge out became visible, also really being far more serious about governance. And at the beginning, the light foot approach significantly limited to what kind of governments the United States and the international community could ask for. Putting in power, not necessarily in power in government, but putting the factor in power through relying on them for military gains, egregious warlords that generated enough entrenchment for the Taliban that the Taliban still has today.

The Taliban is vastly unpopular, but it's not the issue. The issue is what kind of governance people face at the local level. And oftentimes, the governance, through government or government associated power brokers is more predatory, more capacious, more rapacious, less predictable than brutal but predictable and restrained governance by the Taliban.

So, that has been a key problem both in the beginning because of light foot approach, and later on when consistently the issue of immediate military exigencies, the more Taliban killed the better, compromise what we were asking for in terms of governance.

Now, I would point out, or reinforce what Laurel said, namely that there are limits to how fast this can be built, and we see those problems across the world. In insurgency after insurgency the

initial clearing seems easy, and then the morass of governance undermines the gains and brings in resurrection, reinforcement of the defeated entity that morphs in one way or another.

There are few places when that hasn't happened. But we -- but even in the most optimistic cases when the cases with so greatest gains, greatest institutional strength, like Columbia that the Afghan government points to, we see resurrection of the (inaudible), we see this in groups, we see all kinds of new actors. And real, real struggles to bring the state in, in an effective, non-capricious, non-rapacious ways.

MR. BOWMAN: Okay.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: And that's really the crux of our problems in Afghanistan.

MR. BOWMAN: Okay, great. Let's go to questions now. Do we have a mic out there or -- there we go. This gentlemen here I think was first.

QUESTIONER: So, our (inaudible) reports are sort of a mess in the sense that they were providing, I guess, overly pessimistic outlooks by DoD personnel as to the conduct of the war, but their analytics are fairly accurate. And the ANA only has about 70 medium helicopters to cover the entire country. Is there a reason why, to risk invoking to be a gun model that we aren't actually giving them the helicopters that they need for (inaudible) support and just to conduct a normal operations, so they're like a static army?

MS. MILLER: Is your question why we haven't helped the Afghan government build up its air force capacity more quickly? Was that the --

QUESTIONER: I was speaking of helicopters.

MS. MILLER: I mean I would just say there's a long sort of sordid history of U.S. efforts to try to build up any kind of air capacity on the part of the Afghan government, that's complicated by what the way U.S. security assistance works. But is also, perhaps even more importantly, complicated by the difficulty of trying to build up these sort of high end capabilities in a military that has the kind of limitations of human resource capacity that the Afghan -- that Afghanistan has.

And so it's been a very slow process. It's not a matter of just giving them helicopters or not giving them helicopters. There's the training, there's the maintenance, there's all that goes along with it. If I understood your question correctly.

MR. BOWMAN: And also the difficulty of, in a country with 75, 80 percent illiteracy, it's very difficult to train pilots if they can't read. And the, as far as a maintenance with a helicopter, you would have -- and they will likely have contractors for many, many years into the future.

MR. O'HANLON: A couple additional points just to back this up. We decided, as we got more serious about building an Afghan army and police in the McChrystal and Petraeus years, we should focus first on the infantry. Those were the people we most wanted to be out in the field and effective, partly so we wouldn't have to do as much of that fighting ourselves.

Second, the Afghan Air Force were at large. I know you were talking about helicopters, but air power at large, there were a lot of problems with corruption in the leadership of the Afghan Air Force, even more so than in other parts of the Afghan military. And we wanted to try to weed that out first to the extent possible.

A third issue was, do you buy them Russian helicopters or not? Those are the helicopters they're used to flying. Those maybe alleviate a couple of the maintenance challenges of, you know, taking care of a Blackhawk. And yet, first of all, you know, do you really want to rely on that equipment at a time when the Russian defense industrial base wasn't very strong?

And then over time, do we really want to try to work around American sanctions on Russia that were preventing that sort of thing? So, these are some of the practicalities of why it didn't happen to just back up Laurel's point.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well I would add one larger issue. And that is the one that you mentioned, the static army. And its static army -- the Afghan army is a static army, not simply by as a result of the physical capacity limitations it has, but also very much as a result of choice. And the reality is that with the exception of the Afghan Special Operations Forces that are vastly overstretched and overused, the majority of the Afghan army continues to be in a static (inaudible) mode. It's -- you never win a war by being hunkered down. Any kind of war, let alone a counterinsurgency war.

MR. BOWMAN: Right here sir, yep. That gentleman right in the middle.

MR. WINEMAN: Vanda, I was intrigued by something you said --

MR. BOWMAN: Marvin why don't you --

MR. WINEMAN: Marvin Wineman, I'm with the Middle East Institute. You mentioned

that there are discussions going on between the power brokers and the Taliban. I heard similar stories, particularly what happened in Moscow. That raises the possibility, does it not, that we could see a very different kind of peace process? A peace process in which these power brokers seek to strike their own -- their own deal with the Taliban. Something which bypasses a government, which struggles for legitimacy anyway. Is this realistic? And if it does happen what would that process look like?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, it's certainly something that it's on the minds of many very important power brokers in Afghanistan. There is a lot of activity to just about anyone who is not in the government, and even some officials who are still in the government under the current national unity government, that have that on their mind.

And frankly, the Taliban is rather happy with the process. They very much engage in those folks and both sides believe that they can strike a deal and divide the spoils in a way that will outsmart the other group. So, the power brokers will outsmart the Taliban, the Taliban will outsmart the power brokers.

This is taking place both in the south, as well as in the north. I don't see how that process could be successful, unless the official -- successful in the sense of even accomplishing that short term power division arrangement, not saying anything about its desirability or sustainability. But how you could even get to having that arrangement done without some significant weakening, significant hollowing out or outright collapse of the Afghan government. Because the Afghan government is, of course, very actively trying to prevent those processes and stop those processes from going on.

The significant issue, of course, here is the huge paralysis after the elections that is still not resolved, and the paralysis that is increasingly taking on crisis elements. I don't think we are in a full blown crisis. But there is more and more crisis markers to it. And to the extent that that happens, that both zaps the energy of the Afghan government from thinking what it needs to focus on, which is real substance of the talks. As well as enables and empowers and fuels those side conversations and fantasies, and perhaps really destructive scenarios. Because some of them involve power brokers who have very substantial followings and forces in the Afghan National Security Forces.

MS. MILLER: I would just add to that. One hears from both sides engaged in these kinds of conversations and dialogues the line, I mean I've literally heard it from people on both sides.

Well, you know, when Afghans sit with other Afghans we can sort these things out. You know, to which I then think, if you could just sort these things out, I think there wouldn't be some of the problems that there are in Afghanistan. So, there is a sort of over optimistic idea.

And of course, both sides can't be right that they're going to succeed in outsmarting the other side. So, I don't think this is terribly realistic as a near term proposition, so long as the United States is still engaged in Afghanistan and still engaged in trying to get a peace process going. Because I don't think the U.S. would tolerate that kind of informal format for a peace process, even apart from the Afghan government's views.

Moreover, part of what the Taliban wants out of a peace process is legitimacy and international legitimization of their role in governance, partly as a route to having the money continue to flow. And it would be pretty hard for them to achieve that objective through these more informal means. But you know, if the U.S. washes its hands of Afghanistan, washes its hands of a peace process, I could imagine in that scenario, these kinds of in, you know, varied power centers trying to come together to cut some sort of deal. Hard to imagine it would be any more sustainable than the kinds of deals that were cut and then immediately failed in the 1990's.

MR. BOWMAN: Right here.

MR. PAOLO: Thank you very much. My name is Paolo from (inaudible), President of the Global Policy Institute here in Washington. I remember distinctly right after our victory, a senior Afghan official said, in a private meeting, please don't leave. Because if you go in three weeks, the Taliban will be back. And I was shocked. I said, I thought we won, I thought they were, as you alluded to, as the Administration said, where is the Taliban? It's gone, finished. Well, it looks that was pretty prescient in some sense.

The next question, I mean my question really is, can we believe be on the basis of what we know and what Ambassador Khalilzad has been doing that the Taliban are negotiating in good faith? In other words, he's trying to arrange some kind of a deal of power sharing of some kind. Is that realistic, or it's just window dressing, because essentially we are surrendering, we are leaving? We want to put some kind of a nice window dressing to the whole thing and say, okay we've done our best.

Which leads me to my own personal conclusion, but I would like to hear yours. This

reminds me of the Paris agreements in Vietnam. When the North Vietnamese realized that the United States was bogged down with all our internal domestic issues, Watergate, Nixon, and what have you. Well, they attacked South Vietnam, and the South Vietnamese when they saw that we were not coming to the rescue folded in two weeks. So, is that --

MR. BOWMAN: Well, you know, it's a good question. Michael, do you want to address that? Can the Taliban be trusted if there is a peace deal with them?

MR. O'HANLON: I think you need to write a deal that doesn't depend on trust, which is part of why I'm thinking it's so hard. That's why I so appreciate Laurel's report. So, just one, this is not really -- I'm not going to betray any confidences. But about a year ago to this day, and I spent an hour and a half with President Ghani, who was gracious enough to receive me.

And it was pretty clear, I only say this because he's made it amply obvious and other statements publicly, that any kind of a peace deal that he was interested in, if you were going to have Taliban join some kind of a future security force, they would probably have to be individually vetted and recruited into an existing Afghan army and police. That was my sense of what he and other Afghan leaders have been envisioning.

But that's not realistic. As a, you know -- that's basically victory for the Afghan government and defeat for the Taliban who then get fairly gracious, forgiving terms for their individual fighters. That's what that is.

So, Laurel got into things like, could you re-write the constitution so that there's some direct power for local leaders, more than there is today, maybe even direct elections at local levels. Even though the Taliban would like to control the whole country, they can have some share in the overall country but maybe dominance in some of the south and east. You know, even that they're not going to like, that's not what they want.

But that is the sort of thing we have to let them think through, both sides. Because otherwise, you're asking one side or the other essentially to acknowledge the other side has the upper hand or the other side has won. I don't think either side is anywhere near that. Ghani certainly wasn't when I spoke to him or anything I've heard him say publicly since, and the Taliban think that they're winning, and that they'll certainly win if and when we depart.

So, both sides think they have the upper hand, and the actual mechanisms for sharing power, that in a way that doesn't depend on trust, and keeps both sides' leaders relatively safe physically, very hard to envision.

MR. BOWMAN: But if there's a peace deal between the U.S. and the Taliban, and the Taliban goes to talk with the Afghan government, won't the Taliban legitimately believe they have the upper hand? We just dealt with the U.S., now we're going to see you folks.

MR. O'HANLON: I'm afraid that's possible.

MR. BOWMAN: Yeah. And the trust issue you both want to --

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Yeah, I think depends on trust and what, so there are multiple dimensions to the talks as they exist. One of which is, can the Taliban be trusted to prevent the emergence of anti U.S., anti-allied terrorist groups encountered in particularly al Qaeda. But arguably wider said.

That's what the Taliban his apparently promised, it's what's apparently is part of the deal that Ambassador Khalilzad agreed to. There is great deal of variation on whether people believe that that will -- that the Taliban will hold up to that.

I think there is great deal of variation within the Taliban in how they react to it. For a long time some Taliban members believe that the way -- the phrase they use, okay that was a play on Afghanistan, and they believed it was a huge mistake that they hosted it. Others very much are closer to it. It's a very different leadership with very different constraints. It's a leadership that's much more integrated into global jihadi networks and has significant liabilities and commitments to them. So, it's not an easy thing for them to truly agree to that.

Will they hold up a -- but I also want to say, that the Taliban is, to the extent that my interlocutors are in any way representative, very focused on not using international legitimacy and not losing international money. That will be the leverage.

Will the Taliban live up to the intra of gun deal? Well depends on how much power they get. The Taliban believes they will have power, and they will kindly share some power with other non-Taliban power brokers. If that's the outcome of the deal, they're quite liable to hold up to it.

QUESTIONER: That means they won.

MS. MILLER: Look, I mean, if there was a priori trust between parties, you wouldn't need a peace negotiation. The point of a peace negotiation is to test the possibility that you can find a sufficient overlap of interests and accommodations and compromises between the sides that they're willing to abide by the terms that they agreed to. But you're only going to know that if you actually engage in the negotiation, and then you try to mitigate the risks of failed implementation through the structures that you set up. But, you know, you can never know in advance whether you can have absolute trust and the other side's willingness to abide.

MR. BOWMAN: Okay, back there. The pen.

MR. STACY: Jeff Stacy. I've been doing some consulting in recent years with the foreign ministry and the finance ministry, primarily on regional economic integration issues. And there's a lot that is basically looked at in the near future as being possible to achieve, assuming a government is formed and a peace deal is reached.

My question really is about the power brokers outside of Afghanistan, the stakes that the big, for lack of a better term, the great game players. So, China, Russia, Iran, but primarily Pakistan. What are your thoughts about how helpful they are being in the -- in these peace talks? And what role are they being -- are they pushing the Taliban, are they given any sort of assurances or backstops? Or are they playing a role of sort of a spoiler role or hindrance role? Or how do you assess things at this point?

MR. BOWMAN: You want to jump in?

MS. MILLER: I'll start --

MR. BOWMAN: I always heard that China was leaning on the Pakistanis to come up with a deal to not have any more safe havens, because they wanted a nice plate level playing field for the one belt, one road. If you could address --

MS. MILLER: Possibly. I mean, I think that the short answer to your question is yes and no and everything in between. I mean, there are ways in which there are at times some pressure in, you know, the right direction. I mean towards stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan, towards coming together in a peace process.

With respect to China specifically, I believe, yes, China would prefer stability to instability

in Afghanistan. But its bottom line is really what's best for Pakistan and what's Pakistan's interest given the very close relationship between China and Pakistan.

For India, I don't think, or if you mentioned India, India is basically just opposed to a peace agreement, but is not going to play much of a role in actually spoiling it.

For Iran and for Russia, they're in the somewhat comfortable position of having it either in both ways. If there is a peace agreement that brings greater stability to Afghanistan, they benefit from it. If there isn't, they get to blame the United States. So, they can more or less sit on the sidelines and pick and choose when they want to be a little helpful, when they want to be a little less helpful.

Pakistan's obviously the most complicated of these. My sense is that in the last year, as the United States has shown more seriousness of intent to negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban, that the Pakistanis have been relatively more helpful in pushing the Taliban along.

But the Pakistanis have, at the same time, always been perfectly clear that they are not going to, as they would put it, fight the Afghan war on Pakistani soil. And that means they're not going to make the Taliban, the Afghan Taliban, their enemy. And so they will use their leverage. They will pull their strings. But they're not going to cut the strings all together.

MR. BOWMAN: Over here.

MR. ARUSHA: Arusha (inaudible) Afghan scholar here that (inaudible) security. I'm almost thinking that we are in '89, where the Russians thinking how we get out of Afghanistan, and now we're thinking how we are going to leave. And that's also a question. Really, does it we want to leave? Well, yes or not. And it's for us it's good to leave Afghanistan, yes or not. That's I think the Russians at least really clear answer for themselves. We want to get out of Afghanistan. This question I think, also good to hear first.

The second question, we're talking about the Afghan government and the Taliban like two body institutions that cannot talk with each other. But it's not also true and Afghan government is start with and can finish with argument. I mean today we are talking here, is the first -- is the Vice President (inaudible) is fighting with (inaudible), who -- both of them in the same election was (inaudible) the fighting with (inaudible), and going on.

So, there is an Afghan government, and even for us exists here in Afghan government for

the Afghan people not exist. And I agree with you that some cases prefer Taliban above, unfortunately above the Afghan government in the local issues.

My last question is, are we talking about the Taliban? This -- the gentleman who are in the (inaudible), enjoying the hotels and talking -- conversation with us. Or they are the same who are fighting on the ground? Are they going to accept their decision? Because same as it with like someone like (inaudible) he came back and he joined the government. But where is the people affected (inaudible)? Join the ISIS, join the Taliban, join the Pakistani Taliban? What will happen with all those forces and we have unfortunately today, more Taliban fighters (inaudible) fighters than in 2002.

MR. BOWMAN: Right. You know, it's an interesting point, is a Taliban a cohesive unit, are they fragmented, are the folks in Doha speaking for the entire movement? Or some military commanders on the ground, saying we don't want a peace deal, or we're going to start bombing outside of Bagram or in the east? What are your thoughts on the Taliban as a cohesive unit?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: The perpetual dream of U.S. policy and also currently a dream of at least some members of the Afghan government, is that the Taliban can be fragmented and peeled off. And more strategists have been attempting to do that.

I think it's quite remarkable how cohesive the Taliban has been, and that's one of the sources of its endurance. I would say there are two sources of its endurance. One is the overall cohesiveness that is has been able to maintain for three decades now. And the second is its capacity, especially capacity after 2001, to push back from most egregious brutality when the community pushes back against them. It's really the capacity to calibrate brutality imposes on local communities by being somewhat responsive to local communities that gives it the insurance that it has.

Now, does that mean that every single unit, every single commander would obey by the decisions? Probably not. That's rarely almost no -- nowhere, but very, very rarely, I can think of the (inaudible) in power for a while. But just for a while. It's almost never the case where you have 100 percent compliance. The question is, can you have 80 percent compliance, 90 percent compliance in a way that substantially changes the security picture?

I would just add one more thing, Laurel before you talk. But the Taliban is the Taliban leadership is clearly very uncertain as to the preferences of its own military and mid-level commanders.

And that's why the Taliban punts all the difficult questions, all the core questions about what kind of arrangement it wants down the future. The response to what kind of representation, how many ministries, what kind of role for women. Everything is answered through, after we have a deal, after we are in transitional government, we are going to create a commission that will study that.

And one of the reasons they say that is because they understand that committing itself clearly on human rights, women's rights, (inaudible) issues will be very controversial and highly contestable among its own ranks.

MS. MILLER: Yeah, I fully agree with what Vanda said. And I was going to add a point very similar to your last one. Which is that the Taliban themselves are going to be cautious about what they do in a peace process because of concerns about maintaining their cohesion and being to -- being able to implement any commitments that they make in a peace process.

So, this is why you, as Vanda indicated, don't see them moving forward with developing policy positions, with developing negotiating positions, with articulating them, because those will be very divisive issues. And why take the risk of being dismissive before you absolutely must make those decisions and have those internal conversations. But you know, it doesn't mean that they can't get to that point. It's just, it's yet another reason why a peace process is going to take a long time because they haven't done that hard work yet.

MR. BOWMAN: Sir.

MR. COLEMAN: Richard Coleman, retired from CPT. Looking at the Afghan papers, and I didn't read every word, it's such a sad commentary and indictment on the Cabal to continue to lie to the American people, how successful everything was, the Afghans are doing their part. You know, we're really pushing the ball forward.

And in statements from top military people saying what the hell is our mission? What are we doing here? And so I mean, looking back after 20 years of treasure and blood, what is our mission, other than avoiding embarrassment, political embarrassment? And some -- one party being able to point to the other and say, you cut and run, it was yours. You lost Afghanistan when it was lost from the beginning.

Do you think any of those lessons will ever sink in, and we had Vietnam already? And

the Russians had Afghanistan before us, is there a possibility that we will never have a military that you can trust when their assessment of how things are going? Or is it just, you know, fog of war?

MR. BOWMAN: Michael you want to jump on that?

MR. O'HANLON: I'll start on that. Yeah we all have thoughts on this. First, you asked about what is the goal, what is the purpose? And I think preventing another 9-11 that originates from or near Afghan soil has to be the central purpose. And I think we've essentially achieved that so far, at a very high cost, and perhaps -- and not the right strategy as we look back, perhaps. But nonetheless, we have achieved that.

But secondly, there have been a million mistakes and frustrations. And I think the mission has not gone great overall. Having said that, knowing most of the commanders and ambassadors and SREPS, and other people who have spoken to this issue publicly, some of them have tried to look on the cheerier side, give a more hopeful message.

I don't know anybody who tried to deceive the American people publicly, but there may have been an Air Force officer at a command in Host province, who wrote in The Washington Post yesterday, who was told to only show the good news. I'm sure that happened at a number of levels.

But consistently, we know the Presidents of the United States who were behind this mission wanted to put it in perspective. None of them stayed very bullish on this mission very long, even in their public pronouncements. None of them set high goals that they stuck to very long.

And the commanders and diplomats and ambassadors and SREPS, She special representatives, tended to have their debates in public eye about, do we go for a peace process, first, do we do a surge first? How much airpower do we use? Do we allow attacks against the Taliban?

We all know, the Afghan army and police aren't doing very well. That message came through loud and clear for 18 years. I don't know anybody who ever said the army and police are doing great. We're on the verge of being able to hand the war over to them.

And there were some hopeful strategies. And sometimes people even listened to experts like Vanda. At least briefly about how to build anti-opium strategies. They didn't work. It doesn't mean that people were being completely duplicitous about saying, oh, it's working, don't worry the opium is already gone, just give us one more year. I never heard anybody say that either.

So, generally speaking, while I admire a lot of the reporting at the Washington Post in the subsequent stories out of that six day series, I thought the first day was fundamentally incorrect. The first day that construed this pattern of duplicity and deceit on the part of American policymakers, I don't think that existed and I'm pretty emphatic in disagreeing.

MR. BOWMAN: And sir, you raised the issue of Vietnam. I'm wondering how much of this issue over the past 18 years, you can lay on the -- at Congress? Congress really never had serious hearings on the Afghan situation, really going back 18 years. There was no J. William Fulbright that had serious long term hearings on Afghanistan. Could you each address that?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well no, there were multiple hearing, so to say there were none, Tom, I don't think it's a quite fair statement. I think that --

MR. BOWMAN: Well I mean I'm talking about serious long term hearings akin to the Fulbright hearings.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Right.

MR. BOWMAN: I've been going to Afghanistan for years now, and I would watch almost all these hearings on the Hill. A general would come in, sir what's going on in Afghanistan? Well I haven't arrived there yet, I'll let you know when I go. Well come back and let us know. Just keep in touch.

MS. MILLER: But this is a reflection --

MR. BOWMAN: That was repeatedly going on.

MS. MILLER: But Congress -- what Congress does in this regard is a reflection of the American public. In Vietnam there was a domestic political opposition that rose up to the Vietnam War. And therefore you had that kind of -- you have that kind of move in Congress to look for how to get out, how to hold the leaders to account.

There is no widespread domestic opposition to the war in Afghanistan. If you look at opinion polling it's increasingly unfavorable, but it's by no means comparable to what we saw in the Vietnam era. And so it's --

MR. BOWMAN: True because --

MS. MILLER: -- not particularly surprising.

MR. BOWMAN: -- because there was a draft, clearly.

MS. MILLER: Obviously a big factor.

MR. BOWMAN: But still Congress --

MS. MILLER: And 50,000 Americans died.

MR. BOWMAN: -- but still Congress had an oversight role, and I'm just wondering, did they handle that oversight role?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Yeah, well, I think that really the most tragic and the most difficult issue is how can the system correct itself? I too do not believe that every portrayal of the war, however positive, however, in appropriately positive was motivated by deception or outright lying.

But there clearly have been many structural difficulties in recognizing problems and then being able to afford risk. So, the system makes it currently very difficult to experiment with policy and the excruciating, difficult, unpredictable circumstances and constraint. And to say, this didn't work, let's try something else. Or to say it's not like toothpaste, or I would say it is like toothpaste, you can squeeze it out of the tube, but it's very difficult to ram it back into the tube. Often it doesn't work.

But also for individual officers. Both in the civilian side and on the military side, to say we did our best and it really didn't work, that honesty will often be punished. Similarly to be an officer in charge of dispensing money and concluding we have too much money, we really don't need that, will result in punishment, including by Congress by allocating much less money. And that creates other sets.

So, that -- it was well known within the system that there were real problems. But it was very difficult for the system to tolerate the mistakes and correct them in ways that were useful. And all along, and especially as the policy was unwinding, we listened to the surge, that the question became, if we don't do this, are we willing to live with the consequence of catastrophic demise if we pull out under the circumstances. So, the real hard reckoning needed to take place at policy levels, and among the public of saying, okay the patient is on life support, but do we let the patient die? Do we allow very dramatic collapse, very dramatic by civil war, by liquidating a policy that's not radically improving things, but it's keeping some level of hope, some other prevent -- some prevention of utter meltdown.

MS. MILLER: I mean, I would just add to that. I think of the sort of systematic problems that need to be addressed in the future. A big one is that the policy discussions and the so called

strategy discussions, focus overwhelmingly on how much effort to put in. Now, you could talk to people who would deny that this is what the conversation was about, but it really is a lot of what the inside policymaking was about.

How much do we turn up the dials? How much do we turn down the dials on the level of effort? There really isn't a means within the system for addressing the question of how do you end the war? It's just not part of the way that the policy discussion that sort of concept of war termination is not part of the conversation and policymaking within the U.S. government.

And so then what you see is just a modification of the aim. So, the initial aim was to eliminate the problem of al Qaeda and to get rid of the Taliban, because they were part of the problem and replace them with something else. And then it morphs into this preventative mission that, you know, is never ending.

MR. BOWMAN: Here.

MR. BOYD: Members of the, oh sorry, my name is Derek Boyd. Members of the panel seem to agree that peace is a long way off. So, in the near term, it seems to me anyway, that we're in this period where we were discussing the U.S. withdraw from Afghanistan. And what I'm interested in are what of the constraints on that issue that the government, the Pentagon, and so on, will face?

MR. O'HANLON: Well I'll just put it this way that President Trump, not entirely unlike President Obama, two different guys, slightly different in their personalities and politics, but they are not totally different on Afghanistan, as I read them. They both concluded that no ambitious strategy was going to work.

They both essentially said, so most of their Presidencies. And they both had to balance, the desire to get the heck out, with the desire to protect the homeland from another major terrorist strike, or regional dislocation on a scale that likely saw with ISIS taking over much as Syria and Iraq could flood refugees into important allies of the United States.

So, they both had to wrestle with these competing impulses that were almost contradictory. And so we saw almost annual policy reviews in the second Obama term and now in the in the first three years of President Trump's term. When we're always on the verge of saying, we've had enough. And Presidents emotionally are almost always at that point, and most of their voters are at that

point.

But then you say does going to zero really work? Is that really responsible? And so far, no one has concluded that it would be. My prediction and part of why I wrote the 5000 Troops for Five Years paper, I think we can settle into a presence that may concede a little more territory indirectly to the Taliban, but allows the Afghan government to hold on to the big cities, with a more modest and sustainable U.S. force.

I hope, like Laurel said, I'm not wishing war for an indefinite period. I just think it's going to take a while. So, in the meantime, let's sort of make the U.S. military presence there more sustainable, less dramatic, less in need of constant review. I think that's the way you sort of reconcile these otherwise contradictory pressures.

MS. MILLER: You know, we've all agreed about what the consequences of a rapid withdrawal of the U.S. probably would be, and we've talked about a deterioration security, and likely an intensified civil war. But, in terms of what the impact would be on the United States, I personally think there are a lot of questions there. So, what the impact would be on U.S. security.

And one of the issues that I, as far as I've seen, is actually not touched on in the Afghanistan papers that have been published so far, but I think is much more important than a lot of the issues that are touched on, is the failure of U.S. leaders to both internally have a clear-eyed analysis of what really is the remaining terrorist threat for Afghanistan, and does it justify from that dimension alone. The level of U.S. effort there.

And to articulate in an honest way, publicly what the remaining threat is. You know, because of the sort of the shadow of 9-11, it looms in a way that I think is obscured, clear right analysis of what the quantum of threat really is from Afghanistan.

MR. BOWMAN: Well --

MS. MILLER: I personally think it's lower than many claim.

MR. BOWMAN: Well, if anything the military is saying the terrorist threat has expanded. They say there are 21 terrorist groups operating now.

MS. MILLER: Yeah.

MR. BOWMAN: In Iran and Afghanistan.

MS. MILLER: That -- I challenge anyone to name me group number 10 on that list.

MR. BOWMAN: Right.

MS. MILLER: That is a greatly exaggerated --

MR. BOWMAN: You're right, they always come up --

MS. MILLER: -- statistic.

MR. BOWMAN: -- they always come up with a number, but never the names.

MS. MILLER: Right. But you know, there's little tiny --

MR. BOWMAN: Let's --

MS. MILLER: -- splinters.

MR. BOWMAN: Get some more questions. All the way in the back there.

MR. STEVENS: Thank you, James Stevens, Stimson Center. There have been a number of mentions of the necessity of keeping U.S. aid flowing into Afghanistan, following whatever peace deal might be reached. At the same time, there have been several mentions of corruption. And of course, the Afghanistan papers have reminded us all, of course, there was nothing really revealed there that anyone who was paying attention didn't already know.

But it has reminded us of how much U.S. aid has fed into the corruption that exists in Afghanistan, even among the Afghan government. So, I wanted to ask in this sort of political climate of America first and ending endless wars, how the U.S. taxpayer dollars that are going to Afghanistan can be used in a way that doesn't feel corruption and illicit trade and trafficking?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: And look, I don't think there is a way to -- in countries like Afghanistan, or Nigeria, or Somalia, or even Colombia for that matter, the Golden Child of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts, to get to a stage where you have zero diversion and zero corruption. You would only have that stage if you had zero diversion and zero corruption to start with, in systems that are -- that have extremely weak institutions. And are really based around patronage network and (inaudible), corruption is the purpose of government and the essence around which politics is organized.

That said, we can be much more diligent, the United States and the international community can be much more diligent about preventing the most egregious and destructive forms of governance -- of corruption. And this is where I have been urging policy to go for a while. Say what

forms of corruptions are more -- most destructive, when they systematically exclude particular ethnic groups, particular geographic groups, for example. Or corruption that systematically undermines the capacity of Afghan National Security Forces.

And then when we decide what corruption is most destructive to state building and peace building in the country, we need to develop the wherewithal to follow up on what we say are our red lines.

Unfortunately, the policy in Afghanistan, and for that matter in other countries, Somalia is another prime example, has forever been, okay Afghanistan in order to qualify for aid here are 21 conditions. And if you fail these conditions of -- in the review a year from now, you will be denied money. Well the yearly review comes, and it's not just to U.S., it's our international partners. And it turns out that Afghanistan fails 20 of the 21 conditions. And we say, well okay, you know, you tried, you met one, so next time around, we really mean and we'll really cut off money.

So, as long as we set unrealistic guidelines, and then tools that we, for one reason or another because of military exemptions, because of other pressures, violate our anticorruption tools will be limited.

MS. MILLER: But there's an explanation for why that happens. It's that in Afghanistan, we had intertwined counterterrorism objectives, counterinsurgency objectives and nation building objectives, which was really just a subset of the counterinsurgency objectives.

And because of that, we had a strategy, the United States had a strategy that depended for achievement of its counterterrorism objectives on the continued existence and performance of the Afghan government. Because we decided that our counterterrorism objectives required the physical presence of the United States military in Afghanistan, we therefore had to have a counterterrorism partner in Afghanistan, which was the Afghan government.

And so we made our -- we created this codependent relationship, where we were dependent on the survival and the performance of that Afghan government. And therefore you can just never impose genuine conditionality in that scenario. They have you over a barrel because they know that you need them as much as they need you.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: And, you know, I'd like to use that as a transition to answer your question, sir, about what is it that the United States wants in Afghanistan? Because surprisingly, or

maybe not surprisingly, there is tremendous confusion in Afghanistan among Afghan people and including among the Afghan government, as to what the U.S. wants.

I mean I would post it as what the U.S. wants most now is to get out, and get out in a way that avoids meltdown, that avoids civil war, that leaves the best possible chance for peace, but to get out. And with good reason.

The war might not be unpopular in the extent that it generates massive demonstrations on the Mall. But there are very genuine, very important questions to ask, whether the resources being invested at this point, generate outcomes and generate benefits that satisfy -- that justify those expenditure, versus putting the expenditures into tackling the opioid crisis in Ohio, or versus putting those expenditures improving education in Montana.

Those are very valid, very important questions to be asked. And they have to be asked with the choleric question. Okay, if we go out, are we prepared to live morally, in terms of international relations, security, counterterrorism objectives, that the very real possibility that Afghanistan will slide into civil war?

Nonetheless, the fact that we have set conditions and waived them that we have set conditionality and ignored it, and the fact that we have had a set of Presidents all wanting to get out, and all not getting out at the last minute, whether it was President Obama in 2016, or President Trump, has generated a situation in Afghanistan where the Afghan political elite believes they can get away with anything, including literally murder.

Because we will not have the wherewithal to leave. And so the politics, all this remains about politicking, bargaining, bringing the ship of stages to the precipice, but never becomes about serious governance.

I wish we had the strength to say, Afghanistan, you face a dire moment, you have a chance for peace, 40,000 of your people are dying per year, develop interest in yourself to fix it.

And I think if -- that our messaging about our need to leave -- about our desire to leave needs to be couched within that. Because unfortunately, many in Afghanistan believe that we want to be there because of great power competition with China, or Russia, or because of the promise of the trillion dollar war for minerals underneath the Afghan dust. For all kinds of imaginary of the objectives.

And hence they believe that they don't have to negotiate. Because we will stay and will continue fixing the problems. That they don't have to fix the Afghan military and get it out of its static mode, because we will stay and we will fix the problem. That they can continue having fights, like in (inaudible) over the past 24 hours, because we will continue holding -- fixing the problem for them.

MR. BOWMAN: Right here.

MR. LEE: Kevin Lee from Alaska Financial Affairs. It's obvious that leaving Afghanistan and solving Afghanistan problem is not -- it cannot be coexist. So, I'm wondering that if U.S. finally withdraws from Afghanistan or reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan and inducing the inability to solve the Afghanistan problem. Whether which was the alternative, which is to stop the spillover of the Afghanistan problem by isolating them and cut down the transnational network, which is fatal to the spread of the terrorism and also the insurgency. Those things -- that is kind of the viable solution to isolate it.

MR. BOWMAN: I'll just say that Afghanistan was pretty isolated in the 1990's, and look what we got. So, I'm not sure, in principle your idea sounds good. I don't know how to make it work in a way that protects us from the number one concern I had, which is again, a major terrorist strike.

I'll just add one more point which is a tangent. And then Laurel and Vanda may want to speak too. But back in that period, mentioning that period, there's one thing I want to say about the Afghan people, it's not a reason enough for us to stay if our mission is bound for failure, but it is something to keep in mind. Which is, they helped us win the Cold War in a more direct way than almost any other American ally. Because to be blunt they bled the Soviets through the 1980's. And they did the hard work and they did the -- they accepted the risk, they did the dying for that mission to be successful. And that largely is what brought an end to the Cold War.

I'm not suggesting that 30 years later that should fundamentally guide our policy if we're unable to come up with a strategy that works. But if we have a strategy that's sort of muddling along, and the cost has now become tolerable, I think it's something to keep in mind before we pull the plug. That kind of moral and historical debt to what they've done to help us. Thank you.

MS. MILLER: If I could just add to that. Some of the, they in that sentence are people who later became the Taliban or members of the Hicani group.

MR. BOWMAN: It's complicated, true.

MS. MILLER: So, it's a little complicated.

MR. BOWMAN: Right.

MR. GOODFELLOW: Thank you. Bill Goodfellow, Afghanistan Peace Campaign. Michael, I find it hard to believe after 19 years, you've been a great cheerleader of this militarized approach. After 19 years, and particularly after the devastating Washington Post series, how you could still advocate basically a watered down version of more of the same, with the idea that it might work.

It just seems to me I mean we are losing, our guys are losing and your five years 5,000 troops, I don't think will change anything. And it just -- it seems we need a new plan, sort of regional diplomatic approach that Laurel's talking about. But just continuing with the same militarized policy just seems to me to the madness.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, first of all to declare I support Laurel's concepts and Vanda's work in some of the NGO engagement she has on the peace process. I'm just not enthusiastic about the near term prospects of success. But I commend very much the effort, point one.

Point two, I accept that this has been a frustrating mission. And I accepted that a lot of Americans have paid a very high price, and the American taxpayer has paid a high price. But we are trying to protect from another 9-11. And now we're at a point where I think 5,000 troops can do it. And that's sort of the kind of level we've got in Iraq. It's the level we've got in a couple of other Middle Eastern countries. We've, as Tom said, we've got a number of regional terrorist and extremist movements still today, not all of them equally seriously threatening to us --

MR. BOWMAN: But maybe not 21.

MR. O'HANLON: But I think -- maybe not 21. But I think a posture that basically creates four or five major strongholds for American collaboration with indigenous partners, intelligence gathering, and where necessary the application of airpower or Special Forces is the right strategy, because I can't think of a better one.

And I wish I could. But I don't see leaving as the strategy. And I fully support the peace process. But again, you've got parties to this that barely even are willing to talk to each other now, and each of which thinks it has the upper hand. So, you tell me how soon you think that's going to work.

The realistic alternative that we have is something like what I sketched out is to accept defeat and go home and run the experiment. And I hope Laurel's right if we do, which is that we can probably survive the resulting terrorist threat to the United States that it doesn't get a lot worse.

Those are the two choices if you want to make a decision tomorrow, either or. Now, but I very much support what they're trying to accomplish with the peace process. I just think it's probably going to take two to five years.

MR. BOWMAN: Carter.

MR. MALKASIAN: Carter Malkasian of CNN. Tom, can I ask you a question?

MR. BOWMAN: Yes.

MR. MALKASIAN: You've been observing this war for 18 years. You've gone there multiple times. You also pay attention to the political situation in the United States. From a political perspective, can the United States -- can a U.S. leader go to zero in Afghanistan? Can a U.S. leader bear -- is there a risk for a U.S. leader of not having a CT presence there? Or is there not and we can just get out?

MR. BOWMAN: I think it depends which President you're asking that question. I think this particular President would like to -- I mean he said repeatedly he wants to get out of Afghanistan completely. My guess is that those at the Pentagon and elsewhere would say, well sir we should leave some number of troops there to fight, like Michael was saying, maybe 5,000, maybe 2,000, 3,000.

He also wanted to leave Syria. And that did not happen. He said three times over the past year and a half, I want everyone out of Syria. Certain people talked him out of it, and we still have troops in Syria.

So, my guess is, you know, listening to Trump, he wants to get everyone out. My guess is he will be persuaded not to do that.

MS. MILLER: I think its 50/50 either way. But, you know --

MR. BOWMAN: Yeah.

MS. MILLER: I mean, who am I to say. But I find it hard to imagine that if President Trump pulled troops out of Afghanistan within the next year that it would have any impact on his election one way or another. I just find it hard to believe that that's going to be the consequential purely political

issue, barring a major terrorist attack that ensues and the immediate aftermath. But I don't find that particularly likely otherwise.

I would just say to the question about just the persistence of an American military presence there at 5,000, or 2,000, a problem with that proposal from my point of view is that so long as your counterterrorism policy and strategy relies on your continued presence, you're going to have the insurgency perpetuated.

And you're therefore going to have a weak partner in the Afghan government because it will be facing the existential questions of having to fight an insurgency. Which is always going to prioritize over U.S. counterterrorism objectives. And you're going to continue to have the U.S. drawn into the counterinsurgency, because those military officers present are going to be under threat.

And so the idea that there's some, you know, just small number of American troops that you can keep on the ground indefinitely, just attending to U.S. counterterrorism objectives, and setting aside the counterinsurgency, to me is implausible.

And therefore, well I agree that, you know, peace process is not high probability of success. You have to then face the question, if the peace process fails, do you just leave anyway?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, Tom, and I, you know, I would add to the counterterrorism question here of Carter. Afghanistan is, in some ways in the special place in counterterrorism because we are there. Say that we face a major attack out of Nigeria, out of Mozambique, out of Somalia, out of Pakistan. Realistically, would there be President Trump or a Democratic President, President Bloomberg, who would say, okay let's invade these countries with full force, topple down the regime, take over governance. We wouldn't do it even in Somalia. And I would posit that we should not do it in any of these countries.

So, in Afghanistan, we are stuck in a place where we have said the threat happened once. And hence, we cannot imagine any other way, or we cannot risk running the threat, even though we have to live with that threat in other places.

So, to me the, you know, the counterterrorism issue is clearly key vitally with national security objective, does not imply necessarily, though that this means of prosecuting it is the only way of prosecuting it. I think that we have to answer the hard reckoning is, if we leave, if we leave without a

peace deal, or even with a peace deal, are we willing to then live with the consequences of civil war, including massive levels of Afghans being slaughtered?

Are we living to live with the humanitarian, moral and other consequences? And the answer may very well be yes, but that is the question to me that we have to face as a country, that our policymakers need to face, and the public needs to grapple with.

And I would add to that, that the corollary question to that we should be asking is, what are the red lines under which -- under which we should leave? And I have articulated what a set of developments in Afghanistan, but I did not believe it was justifiable anymore to stay. And on the upside, what are the minimal positive developments where we should leave?

MR. BOWMAN: Okay, we got about 10 minutes, so let's try to keep the answers to a minimum. Sir.

MR. PULSAR: My name's Carl Pulsar, and I have a project called the Center on Capital and Social Equity. I'm not an expert on this region. But just as somebody who's been observing, in terms of defining what our national interest is, nobody's mentioned oil. The whole region -- the reason why -- why do we have so many footprints in their region and bases? Because we protect the lifeblood of the capitalist economy that we protect across the globe.

What's different now than 20 years ago? Twenty years ago, we were really importing most of our oil. And now we don't, we really export. We've become somewhat self-sufficient even for, maybe for a few decades.

So, I think geopolitically, I would be one thinking about, can we have, you know, 10, 20 years from now do we need to go back in there once we, you know, exhaust all the fracked oil. But actually, maybe I'm totally off but I -- that must be a part of the whole calculus.

MR. BOWMAN: Anybody? Is oil part of this?

MS. MILLER: Not really. I mean, there is some natural gas in one part of Afghanistan, but it's not -- it's not a place --

MR. MALKASIAN: All three places (inaudible).

MS. MILLER: Yeah, but Afghanistan is a different picture in terms of what its potential exploitable resources are. And frankly, it's, you know, it's also a landlocked country. It's not a, you know,

if you're going to look at American policy objectives from that perspective, Afghanistan is not one of your more useful places to be investing your resources.

MR. BOWMAN: Okay, we in the back there.

MR. COBRA: Stanley Cobra. How secure are our supply lines?

MS. MILLER: The supply lines for the U.S. military?

MR. COBRA: Yeah.

MS. MILLER: That's not been a major issue of late, I haven't, you know, that's -- first of all with the reduction in the number of U.S. forces, it makes the scale of the challenge there less. And things have been on a more, shall we say, stable footing in the U.S. - Pakistan relationship in the last year. Where I've not heard of any threats to the supply lines, threats to closing that down.

MR. BOWMAN: Really going back years, there really haven't been many threats to the supply line. And you're right the level of troops now with 13,000 - 14,000 you're not having nearly the supplies coming in that you had in past years. Also the trucking mafia in Pakistan, I'm sure make sure that those routes are secure.

MS. MILLER: It's lucrative.

MR. LOUDON: Dave Loudon. Have any of our discussions detected any kind of a generational sea change that offers any kind of promise? And if so, or if the issue is civil war or stay in, what kind of metrics might you apply that? Just monitoring such a thing.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, you know, indeed, much of the analysis that are optimistic about Afghanistan center it on the very impressive, young Afghan generation. That the level of human capacity has expanded greatly. Many young Afghan interlocutors are my age young or younger are very impressive.

Will they be able to change the system enough, is one of the important questions. I could again draw analogies to other countries. Nigeria has enormous capacity, extraordinarily impressive Oxbridge educated individuals, young people that not -- and has had for several generations. Nonetheless, the country continues to grapple with egregious miss-governance and corruption.

So, will the young individuals in Afghanistan be able to change the system toward better is one big question. But the second is there is enormous urban rural divide. You also have very many

young Afghan people that are in rural spaces. It might be that most people are in cities, but you still have good number of people in rural spaces, and even in the cities, many of them like opportunities.

So, they might be educated they -- many will have been born after 9-11 and they do not want to go back to the 1990's. But nonetheless, they face no jobs. Many graduates are without jobs. They face paucity of economic opportunities. Many of them are not motivated to work in hard agriculture, subsistence agriculture, or opium poppy agriculture. So, what are the alternatives?

And one of the issue that really is a huge challenge for Afghanistan with the Taliban in power, with the yielded power sharing is whether the country's leadership will be able to develop prospects for those young people. Or whether we will see in a rather short amount of time the emergence of Muslim Brotherhood like mobilizations of co-optation by other forces. And new sources of conflict emerging five years after a Hippy Peace Deal.

MS. MILLER: There's another generational dimension, which is on the Taliban side. There are some close analysts of the Taliban who say that the younger generations of the Taliban are in fact more radical than some of the senior generations. And that this is a phenomenon that's developed in part because during the war, more traditional structures, tribal structures, community structures have broken down.

I don't know myself know the scale and dimensions of that problem. But if it's real, then that's another reason why, even if there is a peace deal, its implementation can be quite difficult.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: And the younger leadership or younger, middle commanders are also much more plugged in to the global jihadi networks than the older generation was. So, you know, in the 1990's we talk about Palestine in Afghanistan is like what's the issue?

There is now much more because of internet communications, fundraising structure, just much more knowledge of what's happening in the global jihadi spaces elsewhere. And the solid quite significantly with ISIS and ISIS and Khorasan which is the Afghan branch.

MR. BOWMAN: Okay, I think we have time for a couple more. Anybody else who hasn't asked a question? Way in the back.

MS. SMITH: Hi, Mary Smith.

MS. MILLER: Can't hear you. Sorry.

MS. SMITH: Hi, Mary Smith from DAI. Hi is this better? Perfect. Hi, Mary Smith from DAI. I'd like to address this to Laurel first if I can before other members of the panel. So, U.S.A. Afghanistan has several development programs that are dependent on success of the peace process. Namely, a jobs for peace program and the continuation of a women's civil society program.

And so they've kind of been placed in a holding pattern since the autumn of its uncertainty. So, Laurel, what would you advise the folks in the embassy to do regarding best practice on kind of tailoring these economic growth and governance programs amidst all these -- all this uncertainty?

MS. MILLER: I hesitate to say this because I don't know it for a fact but I very strongly suspect that what's going on is that existing programs are being redefined to be supposedly in support of a peace process, or implementation of the peace process. I say that partly because that's, I just know how the U.S. government works. And that's a typical way it works.

You know, I don't think there's -- if there are programs that are being pegged specifically to implementation of a peace process, I don't think that there's really much you can do, other than stand by and see if one develops some traction.

But I also would say, you know, there are probably at this stage limitations to how effective some of these programs are going to be anyway, unless the peace process takes hold.

MR. BOWMAN: Anybody else? Last question?

MR. BLOOM: Peter Bloom retired Foreign Affairs. Let's say you have an unrealistic miracle and the Taliban do former government along with the existing government, what kind of policies or programs would they want implemented, just holding on to power?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well the Taliban is rather explicit that it wants a country that's ruled in accordance with Islamic doctrines. Now, of course Islamic doctrines can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways and under the existing constitution of Ghana's standards, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

The Taliban does not believe that the Islamic character of the Republic is adequate. They -- one of the big fights is whether the war should be Emirate or Republic or what kind of combination that expresses how they believe -- how they believe that the existing setup is inadequate.

Now, that's part of the issue that will be very much questioned. That our big discussions

about what role for women, some Taliban interlocutors will say, look, a woman can be even the minister. But absolutely not a prime minister or president. Others will express much greater restrictions on the role of women and their role in public space when they reach puberty certainly.

If you look at how the Taliban rules in practice on the ground in territories where they control, it varies quite substantially by the shadow district governor and military commander. But they tend to impose significant restrictions on what we will define as civil liberties and freedoms.

They will tolerate education for girls up to a certain point. They will often have a Taliban member present in the school to make sure that only what they believe is appropriate is being taught. But at the same time, they will also make sure that the teacher shows up. That the teacher does not moonlight and does not collect money for being a teacher and be abroad.

So, certainly they have been prohibiting music, they sometimes -- and TV, daytime soap operas. They sometimes say we are only prohibiting it now, once we are empowered they will allow it, but right now, we cannot allow it.

They are quite explicit that they do not want an economic collapse. Now, that does not mean that they have really an economic vision other than preserving the flow of international aid, and possibly international investments. And have been quite effective in reaching out to China, for example, and promising China that Chinese investments will be protected in the country ruled by the Taliban.

MS. MILLER: I mean they claim that they recognize -- they claim to foreigners at least, that they recognize mistakes of the Taliban regime of the 1990's and that it will be important not to repeat those mistakes. Precisely what they regard as mistakes and what they will do differently is another question. And, you know, one hopes that if there is a peace process, and it takes some time and these are questions that will be explored. But I don't think in reality we're really going to know until the aftermath.

MR. BOWMAN: So, on behalf of Vanda, thank you for coming. Thank you to Tom and Laurel. Happy Holidays to everybody. Really appreciate you being here. (Applause)

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