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P R O C E E D I N G S

GENERAL ALLEN: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is John Allen. I'm the president of The Brookings Institution and it's -- it's a great pleasure for me to welcome you this morning to today's event, which is entitled, "The Future of U.S. Policy in Afghanistan".

Now earlier this month on the 11th of September, the Afghan government touched down in Doha in Qatar to begin peace negotiations with the Taliban. The significance of that date is self-evident for so many of us, remembering where we were on that faithful horrific day 19 years ago and how it changed America, Afghanistan, and truly the world. I would never have imagined that 10 years after the 11th of September 2001, I'd find myself in Afghanistan commanding the war. And I still can't believe that 9 years after that, almost 20 years if we say, this conflict would still be going. Indeed, in those nearly two decades, Afghanistan and its people have witnessed and experienced a constant push and pull between hope and stability and chaos and violence. In this year alone in February when news arrived that the United States had worked out its deal with the Taliban, one entirely divorced from the government and thus, the people of Afghanistan, the rightful skepticism remained and emerged even greater than before.

Will these negotiations bring peace to the Afghan society? Moreover, could these agreements be sustained or trusted? Could the Taliban be trusted? And what of the women of Afghanistan, those who have endured so much over these past decades? Even here in the United States, Afghanistan has become known sadly and somewhat irreverently as the forever war. America's longest conflict, spanning now generations. 775,000 U.S. service members are estimated to have deployed to the country. It is a conflict that has defined a generation of U.S. defense and foreign policy, and has indeed, it has defined much of the American society in many respects, and the cost in every sense of the word has been significant.

Today, both the Democratic Nominee, Vice President Joe Biden and the current President, President Donald Trump, have spoken of how they would and will end the U.S. conflict in Afghanistan and how they envisage the future of Afghanistan in the aftermath. And nonetheless, what comes next remains deeply uncertain regardless of the pronouncements of these two gentleman. So for our event this morning, we'll be joined by several Brookings experts and scholars who will offer their own views on this critical issue. I can't imagine three better to take us through this matter this morning.

First, the panel will be moderated by Senior Fellow and my deer friend, Mike O'Hanlon, and our panel will -- will be composed of two magnificent scholars at Brookings, the David M. Rubenstein Fellow, Madiha Afzal, who is a Senior, and our Senior Fellow Vanda Felbab-Brown. Their bios are on our website and the work that they have done has been spectacular in these areas and in issues associated with South Asia. But they are -- I can find no better to talk about the evolution of U.S. policy in Afghanistan, what lays ahead for the country and for America. So before they begin, a quick reminder that today's event is on the record. We're streaming it live, so please feel free to submit your questions via email to either events@brookings.edu, that's events@brookings.edu, or via Twitter at the hashtag #policy2020. So with that, let me turn the floor over to Mike O'Hanlon and Mike, the floor is yours, and thank you all for being with us this morning and to the panelists, thank you for your expertise and your skilled scholarship in this area. Michael.

MR. O'HANLON: John, thank you, and of course we are honored to have you introducing this event. It's remarkable, as you say that it's been so many years since you commanded in Afghanistan, but your service continues to be one of the most important shaping events there and I was privileged as you know, to visit you there. I think Vanda was as well. We both learned a lot and of course for those and other trips, we're delighted of course to have Vanda and Madiha to help set the groundwork in this first round to remind people of where we stand with the effort at building a new Afghanistan, the effort in the military campaign, the effort in the peace talks, and what this all means for U.S. policy, which will be what we get to in a second round. So we're going to -- we're going to try to sort of lay the groundwork empirically and factually, remind people of where we stand in a first round of quick intervention starting with Vanda, and then come through with policy recommendations in a second round before we get to audience question and answer. All of that will be in the space of 60 minutes, the last 10 of which I apologize that I will miss because I have to prepare for an event with the House Armed Services Committee that we hope people can tune into as well right after this. So, Vanda without further ado, let me first of all thank you for your remarkable field research and your commitment to the peace process in Afghanistan, your ongoing bravery in visiting that country, the real pathbreaking work you've done over the years, and look forward to your thoughts to help frame this conversation.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you, Michael. It's a real pleasure and honor to be

doing this event. One of the things I most value about Brookings is the commitment to deep research, peer review, and no institutional position on any issues. And I -- I hope that the conversation today will highlight and bring light to our audience and participants the many difficult dimensions, challenges, and tradeoff of the situation in Afghanistan and no easy path. I also am deeply thankful to General John Allen, our President at Brookings, for both opening the panel, but more importantly his service to our country and to Afghanistan. And it was an honor to write the recent paper with John on the fate of women in Afghanistan, an issue I am so impressed of how John is committed to, to see that half of the Afghan population doesn't suffer again the brutality of the 1990s, and of course an issue that's fundamental to the values of the international community.

That said, the situation in Afghanistan is not easy. The peace negotiations that started between the Taliban and the Afghan Republic, perhaps the best chance for peace in the two decades. It isn't the fact that this is a better chance does not mean that it is a very large chance. It's quite easy to imagine that the negotiations will not work out in the timeframe that is thought about and that is linked to the U.S.-Taliban agreement, which mandates that the United States withdraws all of its forces by May 2021. It's all over a possible world that the negotiations could go on for not just months but in the years punctuated by a lot of fighting and punctuated by evolving situation on the ground. In fact, I think that this is a quite likely scenario. I will come back and do a second set of remarks what this means for U.S. choices. Let me make some observations about the realities on the ground.

One of the reasons why the peace negotiations are the best change for peace in a setting in which tens of thousands of Afghans are dying every year, more so in recent years every year the numbers are greater is because there is no prospect of a definite victory on the battlefield. There is certainly no prospect of the United States and the Afghan government defeating the Taliban, and this prospect will not be altered if U.S. forces stay beyond the May 2021 deadline. The situation is one of a slow deterioration in the Taliban's favor. In very many ways, but in dramatic ways such as skip to the provincial capitals, the Taliban is steadily chipping away at the control of the Afghan government. All manner of insecurity is rising, including in places like Kabul, frequently relating to a variety of actors such as criminal groups. Nonetheless, all of this plays into the hands of the Taliban.

In this difficult prospect, however, the Taliban is slowly gaining ascendance and it's well

aware of that and that structures the negotiations as such, and Allen mentioned the deal that the United States and Taliban struck in -- at the end of February in Doha is a deal that the Afghan government has not liked. It's a deal that Afghan government has very strongly tried to avoid. What else do you say? But it states two principle points. One is that the Taliban will commit itself not to launch or allow Afghan territory to be launched for terrorist attacks against the United States and U.S. allies. The Taliban has refused to explicitly commit to severing relations with Al-Qaeda, something the United States has long demanded. But nonetheless, there is an assumption that the Taliban do so. How faithful and credible the Taliban is going to be to that issue is highly contested. Certainly there is a lot of questions and reasons for some level of skepticism.

And the second element then is that the U.S. do withdraw all of its forces by May 2021. Again, there is questions and conversations of interpretations of whether that is a firm and definite commitment to the withdrawal regardless of whatever legal space there is in the actual deal and of course the capacity to violate that legal space lifts the Taliban expectation. And again, I will come back to what it would mean to break that expectation. There was originally hope that two other elements would be also included. One, a cease fire, a permanency fire, and second, the beginning of negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. After months of controlling and pressure on both sides but particularly the Afghan government, those negotiations just very recently started, and it is very good that they started. The Afghan government has been trying to avoid the negotiations because it does not want to yield power to the Taliban. They often imagine that the negotiations could in some ways mimic either negotiations that go on within (inaudible) essentially an amnesty to a notorious warlord with severe human rights violations in exchange for its participation in the political system, or more likely negotiations -- or more likely the view of the government negotiations in Columbia between the Columbian government and the FARC. But the latter in my view is -- is unrealistic as the former. When the negotiations in Columbia took place, incidentally, formally officially taking four years with really two years of preparation before they took place, so six years of negotiations, the conflict was truly solved. In Afghanistan it's not solved, slowly steadily deteriorating in the Taliban's favor. But it will start at the very low level when the potency of the FARC was far lower than the potency of the Taliban.

So it's very unlikely that we will see any kind of deal in which the Taliban immediately

gets an amnesty and token participation who can guarantee the seats in the Afghan parliament like the FARC got in Columbia. In fact, the Taliban envisions the negotiations to be one of leading to its dominant role in the government. Now under the best of circumstances from the Taliban's point of view, this could include sharing power, and it has already stated that it's willing to share power with minority groups, for example in other (inaudible) power brokers who are not linked to the Taliban. But it's also rather obvious that it rejects the government of President Ashraf Ghani. Very likely, the negotiations -- at the same time the Afghan government of course wants to protect its existing power and the existing political dispensation in Afghanistan with all the rights and protections and exist. So two maximalists' positions, very, very far apart. It's very difficult to see how any kind of view could be struck by May, which those diameters, they oppose positions and it might really take a very long time for both parties having to make some hard sacrifices. Whether this will be possible, open question. Certainly the continuation of a civil war in Afghanistan potentially highly unidentifiable war is a very possible scenario with outside actors playing a role in that.

As of now, and I'll end this with the basic layout of the -- of the facts on the ground, there is commitment on the part of international actors to see and negotiate the deal. The vast majority of actors do want a coalition government. They do not prefer that the Taliban solely dominates the government. Nonetheless, all major regional actors with the exception of India, but certainly Russia, China, and Iran have made their own peace with the Taliban. They don't prefer Taliban run government. They don't prefer the Taliban solely government, but they could live with it. And the Taliban is extensively engaged with them to persuade them that it can guarantee their interests.

The European Union has been very strong in emphasizing that it will never tolerate an Islamic indurate that the Taliban has been suggesting. That's the regime it wants. And it will then be a significant issue in managing the expectations of the Taliban and/or international right, but nonetheless, the hand is weak. With that, I will finish here and leave it over to Madiha to speak about Pakistan and also join in the conversation as to where we are.

MR. O'HANLON: And Madiha, straight over to you, my friend, and thank you very much for your work including your excellent book, "Pakistan Under Seize". And your understanding of that country, its own internal and regional challenges hits perspective on Afghanistan. I'm sure you'll bring all

of that into the discussion as well. Over to you.

MS. AFZAL: Thanks, Mike and Vanda for those great comments. I will divide up my sort of initial comments in two parts. One, a discussion of the U.S.-Taliban deal struck on February 29th and where it leaves us sort of more broadly. Vanda had a detailed discussion of that, so I'll offer some thoughts as well. And then secondly, I'll talk a little bit about where Pakistan stands and where we can see it going because Pakistan has of course facilitated the -- the U.S.-Taliban deal and is also lending a helping hand to the intra-Afghan peace process, and as Afghanistan's neighbor has played a key role in the trajectory of that country for decades.

So -- so starting of with the -- the U.S.-Taliban deal and -- and where we are today. To -- to get -- you know, given that a military victory was not possible in Afghanistan, to get the Taliban to -- to the table, to get a deal struck, you know, to get these intra-Afghan talks started in Doha, which is historic, is all an achievement. And you know, the -- the Trump administration deserves some praise for getting us to this stage. But there are real questions as to what has been given up and what will be given up in this process. So I, among my other colleagues, have argued that this very fair nature of the U.S.-Taliban deal and the lack of guarantees for Afghan, you know, in particular on democracy, on human rights, on women's rights, on a cease fire, in exchange for very, very narrow counter terrorism promises was an opportunity lost really in this -- in this process. You know, and -- and perhaps that opportunity was lost because President Trump you know wanted a deal before this election campaign this fall and -- and sort of made that -- that played a role, you know. Ending America's endless war helps him on the -- on the campaign trail.

So that -- that -- that is really sort of a concern. You know, what has been lost? And some would argue should this really be a concern for the U.S.? Human rights, women's rights, democracy -- these -- these issues are being trampled over all over the world, and does maintaining a force posture in a country, is that the only tool we have or is that the only tool we should use? No. That is certainly not the case that -- that you know, we should use a force posture in every country to try to impose democracy or human rights or women's rights. But in Afghanistan, that question is a false one. So this war began in Afghanistan 19 years ago with one goal, and that was to defeat Al-Qaeda. And then from there, the goals morphed as we all know. The goals morphed from defeating Al-Qaeda to defeating

the Taliban, then to nation building, and now we're back again to sort of a very narrow counter terrorism goal. But I would argue that we are doing ourselves and the Afghans a huge disservice if we forget all that has been lost, money, lives, both U.S. as well as Afghan lives in the process, and then focus only on very narrow counterterrorism goal that we do not want Afghan soil to be used to attack America or its allies.

So, the -- the question is that you know, so given the investments, you know, if one puts it very cynically, over the last 19 years we need something to show for it. And that something is already there. That something is the gains that have been made by Afghans in terms of democracy and human rights, and it is our responsibility then to preserve those gains. And that is beneficial not only for Afghans, of course, who would benefit more directly, most directly from them, but also for the U.S., which needs a narrative win in -- in this war where it has not been able to win militarily. If -- if one looks back you know 40 years, and -- and in particular to the end of the Soviet-Afghan war at the end of the 1980s, America leaving that region in a rush, in haste, actually has defined the region's narratives on America no matter what else has happened in the meantime since then. And -- and to again lead without guaranteeing the principles that we hold dear, democracy, human rights, given all the investments that have been made so far, I think would be -- would be a huge miss.

Now, what's -- what's been done is done, right? We have the February 29th deal. It does not guarantee human rights or women's rights or Afghan democracy. It leaves those to intra-Afghan peace negotiations. Though both Ambassador Khalilzad and Secretary Esper have insisted as well as others, Secretary Pompeo, have insisted that future aid and future engagement would be Afghan's will and you know, with sort of whatever Afghan government comes out, will depend entirely on -- on sort of how these issues are -- are treated. So aid, the relationship with the -- the new Afghan government post -- post deal will depend on that.

So, that -- that -- that is -- that is the case. But I would argue that we should think very, very carefully going forward as we look even now at the next U.S. administration and then this is something I will talk about in my sort of next set of remarks. We should define our future engagement and withdraw troops depending on sort of this -- these questions of democracy, women's rights, human rights.

I think the other point that I want to quickly mention, and this is something I have written about as well, is that you know the -- the counter terrorism sort of commitments and -- and those that haven't been kept to date, you know, the UN has alluded that the Taliban has not cut ties with Al-Qaeda. The counterterrorism commitments are very, very narrow. What about other groups? What about the (inaudible), which actually exists on Afghan soil and attacks -- attacks Pakistani targets from -- from Afghanistan. It was pushed there through the Pakistani military's sort of kinetic action against the group in Pakistan's northwest a few years ago. So what -- what of those groups that attack other targets, not the U.S. and its allies, but it exists in Afghan and the region?

What about the question of legitimacy to terrorist groups and fundamentalists that the U.S. giving the Taliban this kind of -- this deal in this relative card blanche gives? You know, these are questions that we really, really need to grapple with, and a narrative void is not the way to go forward on that. I will switch now to -- to Pakistan. And sort of the question of -- of Pakistan and -- and its role. So I think the first thing to acknowledge is that Pakistan has helped in this -- the whole process today. And this is help, however skeptical folks may be about it. This is help that has been acknowledged from multiple angles now. The Afghan angle and the U.S. side as well, and extensively the -- the occurrence of sort of peace process began with the -- you know, President Trump writing a letter to Prime Minister Imran Khan asking for Pakistan's help. So then some would argue, well is Pakistan truly sincere? And would point to you know, the -- the Pakistani states' sponsoring of and havens for elements of the Afghan Taliban over the years. And -- and folks would say, well look, the Taliban has the upper hand now, sure Pakistan is helping the U.S. and the Taliban because at this point it knows that the Taliban is going to come out of ahead.

I would give two sort of rejoinders to that. One is that Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban, while Pakistan has some leverage on it, is not what it was. In particular, a group related to the Afghan Taliban, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan has attacked Pakistan and killed tens of thousands of Pakistanis. And so why Pakistan may be happy with an empowered Afghan Taliban? It will not be happy with such a group at the expense of its own security. So that's really a concern. The -- the relationship is no longer seamless. And the relationship with (inaudible). Pakistan's relationship with (audio skip) has really shown signs of improving in recent months and in particular, you know, the -- the leader of the

reconciliation group, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah is in Pakistan right now and has had sort of lots of meetings with pump and circumstance with the Pakistanis or leadership and there is a real sense that Pakistan and Afghanistan will be turning the page or want to turn the page at their sort of relationship over the past many years that is finger pointing at each other and is marked by a great deal of mutual distrust.

I think just my last two points on this will be that Pakistan's whole sort of -- Pakistan's whole posture in Afghanistan has been defined by the idea that its India's influence in Afghanistan that it is worried about. It wants strategic depth. It wants a dominant position on its western border as it's sort of got an enemy on its eastern border, India. Those worries, though Pakistan is still pointing fingers at India for having an undue influence in Afghanistan, those worries have waned a little bit because India has really not been on the table in the past year and a half, while Pakistan has been. And Pakistan's relationship with (inaudible) has also improved. So I would argue that, that -- those worries about India defining Pakistan's behavior have waned. And I think more broadly, you know, Pakistan has been talking about a peace dividend. It knows that stability and security on its western border is something that will benefit it economically. Pakistan has seen the -- sort of the outcome of violence and -- and it hasn't been good for them economically. There is a growing sense, not -- not -- not a dominant sense yet, but a growing sense that economic gains and a sort of a rising Pakistan economically is the only way now that Pakistan can succeed and get the posture it wants on a global stage. And so you know, it will sort of go forward and -- and argue for that peace dividend.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Thank you both very much. I think we have a good empirical and factual backdrop, so we're going to launch straight into round two and do round two a little more quickly so we still have time for audience Q&A, and I'm going to begin round two as a panelist in addition to playing my role as moderator, which I'll revert to thereafter. I'm just going to put a couple of the policy suggestions on the table going forward, and I think they build on much of what Vanda and Madiha have said, although I don't expect Vanda and Madiha to agree completely, and I'm sure we'll hear some nuance or some disagreement from them in just a minute.

I believe that because there is virtually no prospect of a successful peace negotiation in the next few months, because both sides wrongly think they have a decisive upper hand and it's also very hard to conceive of a genuine 50/50 power sharing, especially with the idea of how do you merge the

security forces of the two sides. Because of that, I expect negotiations to be protracted in the best case probably a breakdown completely a couple of times. And for these reasons I think it's essential that the United States clarify its view about next year. I don't expect this to necessarily be possible before the November 3rd presidential election, but I think that either a reelected President Trump or a newly elected President Biden should commit to what I call 5000 for 5, 5000 or so U.S. troops for 5 years. And what I mean by that is if we continue to live in this limbo where the Taliban believe incorrectly in my judgement, that the February 29th accord requires the United States and NATO to leave entirely by May of 2021, there is virtually no chance the Taliban will negotiate in good faith because the Taliban will assume that over time they will win the war against a isolated Afghan government, even if we continue to provide the several billion dollars in security aid and several billion dollars in economic aid that the international community is currently providing to that government. The Taliban still think that they will win the war because they consider the Afghan government to be just a puppet of the west and essentially feckless and powerless, and as Vanda pointed out and I agree with Vanda, the war is already gradually trending in the Taliban's favor even with United States and NATO still present.

Therefore, if the Taliban can look forward to a complete U.S. and NATO departure in the space of about just eight months from now, I think they will stonewall it in negotiations and then they will expect victory thereafter. I'm not trying to let off the hook the Ghani-Abdullah team. I think they equally believe that a Hekmatyar deal is the sort of thing that they should be offering and not much better, not much more, where essentially the Taliban would acknowledge that they are the weaker party somehow, that they are the less legitimate party, and essentially play by the rules of the Constitution of the existing international order and essentially defer to the current Afghan government and political system as the first among equals.

I would prefer that, but that's not reality. That's not consistent with power realities on the ground. And so I think that what we're going to have to do is disabuse both sides of their current theories of success at the negotiating table, but the -- the crucial first step to my mind is that the United States commit to stay beyond May 2021. And my very last point, the reason why I think we should do this in addition to the fact that I think it's essential to have any chance at a successful negotiation. When I read the February 29th deal, I see the four basic elements as interconnected. And one goes with the others.

And the third and fourth provisions are about not just starting a peace process, not just starting an intra-Afghan negotiation, but mapping out a comprehensive plan for power sharing. It doesn't mean it has to be implemented before NATO would leave, but it does mean that there has to be a serious architecture for power sharing. And until that happens, I don't think the May 2021 deadline for departure applies. Vanda may look at it slightly difficulty, so I'll now turn to her and then Madiha for their views on policy and then we'll come to audience Q&A.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well Michael, I agree that the most difficult and really fundamental question for the next administration is to decide whether to keep troops in Afghanistan beyond May 2021. There can be some leeway of weeks or a few months. But beyond that, if the decision is made to stay with an open-ended commitment or with the commitment for example five years a few have been arguing for, there is very high chance that the negotiations will fall apart. They might fall apart for other reasons, but very high chance they'll fall apart for that reason, and that will jeopardize whatever deal the United States and the Taliban made in Doha. For the Taliban, the dozens of U.S. troops is simply acceptable.

So with staying on with military commitment of several years or much beyond a few months' window beyond May, essentially means having -- undermining and weakening whatever was achieved in Doha and launching into a situation of no exit again, no clear exit. If U.S. troops stay in Afghanistan, they are not going to change the battlefield realities. They will delay the speed with which the Taliban is chipping at power, but it will also result in Taliban attacking U.S. bases and we can very get in a situation like we are seeing with Iraq, the U.S. bases are frequently attacked with missiles and that limits activities. The U.S. could make a decision to go into full offensive activity against the Taliban. The Afghan government very much wants that. The Afghan government might be quite happy to see a collapse of the Doha deal even as now it is negotiating. It doesn't want to accept the Doha deal as the premise of the Taliban negotiations, but the Taliban insists that it must be the -- the cornerstone of the negotiations.

The problem with staying is that there is no prospect for winning. That it sets back dramatically any kind of chance of a peace deal, and it comes with very significant costs. Let's talk -- let's talk about what interests the United States has in the area. The most fundamental interest from the U.S.

and South Asia is nuclear stability. This is principally about Pakistan and India, but there is some influence of the Afghan space in Pakistan for reasons that we can get in the question and answer period.

The second interest or part of that interest is U.S. safety and security. That it is principally linked to terrorism. It goes back to 9/11, but we need to understand that in the 20 years since 9/11, the United States has significantly hardened the homeland, developed all kinds of counterterrorism capacities and counterterrorism actions that are not simply hinged on having boots on the ground. And indeed, if U.S. bases in Afghanistan were simply about counterterrorism actions, they would not be palatable even for an Afghan government since they would not contribute to what the Afghan government most wants, which is holding the speed with which the Taliban is taking ground.

And then there are a set of other interests that Madiha elucidated, democracy, women's rights, preservation of economic improvement in Afghanistan. Those are all important interests, but the United States has no capacity to guarantee them, even if we add in Afghanistan for another 10 years, we have no capacity to guarantee those interests. We should be promoting them, but then it comes to how -- what are the appropriate means? And we need to think in a much more comprehensive way about costs in Afghanistan and stop being stuck in a position of discussing Afghanistan merely in its own terms or perhaps regional terms but think about the costs and the larger issue of U.S. national strategic priority. There are costs to U.S. lives. They are significant and they should never be minimized even if it is "just a few U.S. soldiers dying". It's not the right attitude in my view. There are significant financial costs and they might be small in the terms of U.S. budget, but they come with tradeoffs and opportunities. The money that's devoted to U.S. military deployment in Afghanistan could be put to a whole set of domestic issues. It could be put to a set of other foreign policy issues.

There are costs in terms of what's happening with U.S. policy, the rise of right wing militias in the United States. The violence and the threat to rule of law they pose is very much linked to U.S. open-ended military deployments abroad. Many members of the right wing militia and not just (inaudible), but many others are veterans who have not been able to adjust to life post war. So very significant issue. I would say greater U.S. national security priority than other issues. So there are real costs of staying. And finally, there are geostrategic costs in terms of what it means for U.S. relations with a whole set of countries in the region, Russia, China, India and what it means with respect to what's

happening in the Indo-Pacific here.

Finally, related to that is the cost, the draw, the stamp on U.S. special operations forces and intelligence forces that are pinned down on Afghanistan that could and arguably should be deployed in other parts of the world. So staying in militarily without a prospect of our breaking the slim but nonetheless real accomplishment of the Doha deal means no exit, no obvious exit, little prospect of changing the battlefield realities.

Now, I want to stress that however, that doesn't mean that the U.S. should abandon Afghanistan. There are good reasons to be using -- to stay economically, diplomatically, politically to be using U.S. economic leverage such on the Taliban, making very clear that any kind of viable future Afghan government will be fundamentally dependent on international aid including U.S. aid and that means that there will be behaviors and policies and approaches that are not going to be tolerable such as massive violations of rights of women, massive violations of rights or minorities. But much of U.S. policy reckoning in the administration in the very early months of the next administration will be not just about what we want, not just about our interests and our values, but about the reality of the needs that we have foregone to accomplish them and it crucially needs to be about the Afghanistan stance in the larger domestic economic political situation and in the larger geopolitical and national security interests of the United States.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Vanda. So just to prove that we have different views at Brookings. You have one panelists who thinks that it would enhance the peace prospects, peace talk prospects if we stay, and one who thinks that it would enhance the prospects if we leave. So that's a pretty good reflection of diversity of use. Madiha, over to you. I'm not sure you can settle that matter, but I'm sure you have another insight or two to add to the mix.

MS. AFZAL: Thanks -- thanks Mike and Vanda. You know, those were both really compelling and so I will just offer a few thoughts and then sort of lay out where -- where I am on this. In recent sort of appearances and in particular, the House hearing that was held last week, I believe it was last Tuesday, Ambassador Khalilzad, and my viewpoint of this as well, Ambassador Khalilzad insisted that the four elements of the deal are interconnected and in some sense, sort of alluded to the fact that we would as the U.S., not lead essentially. We had the option of not leading and reevaluating our force

posture basically you know, in the runoff to May 2021, in looking at how the intra-Afghan peace negotiations are going. So even though the deal does not -- does not make clear that American withdrawal is linked in my view to the intra-Afghan peace negotiations succeeding or finishing or you know, proceeding well, he is insisting, and you know others have insisted that the U.S. will reevaluate sort of the -- the promise that the U.S. with withdraw by May 2021 on the basis of how things are going.

So in that sense, I would disagree that we, at that point, you know, everybody's sort of on the same page that the intra-Afghan peace negotiations will not have finished or not have reached a conclusion by that point. So I would disagree that the U.S.-Taliban deal is violated. If you know, Ambassador Khalilzad and Secretary Esper and others have insisted over and over again that it's a package seen as for if the U.S. actually agrees or decides not to withdraw all troops by May 2021. So then I would argue that we should use force posture, as Mike has said, you know, 500 for 5 or some foo force posture to guarantee what you know I laid out earlier. Or -- or -- or assert ourselves a bit more forcefully on what I laid out earlier, the issue of democracy, the issue of you know, an intra-Afghan peace yielding reached with the issue of democracy, the issue of human rights, the issue of other terrorist groups in the region and sort of assert ourselves on those three fronts using -- using forced posture. And I would argue that without the pressure of an election and a campaign, you know, both Trump administration and 2.0 and a Biden administration would perhaps take things more slowly and lean towards -- towards that perhaps a little bit more with a President Biden and less with a President Trump, though you know, obviously both of them have noted that they do want to -- to withdraw. It's -- it's interesting to see how democrats and republicans sort of come out on this issue.

So I'll note two points. One, a survey done by the Chicago Council, a poll done in January 2020, which insisted -- I'm sorry, which -- which came out with the -- the view that 48 percent of Americans who were polled basically said that we should have long-term bases in Afghanistan, 49 percent you know, said that they don't think we should have long-term basis in Afghanistan. But more republicans you know, far more republicans than democrats are for maintaining a true presence long-term than democrats. So that's really interesting, because that means that President Trump sort of has a divide with his base.

The other sort of point that I'll offer up is that in the House hearing last week, it was you

know one of the big issues that came up over and over again was the issue of sort of women's rights. And that was brought out by democratic committee members over and over again. And so I think there will be real pressure from both sides, from the republican side and the democratic side in the -- the next administration regardless of who might -- who it may be to not squander gains and to leave hastily without having accomplished you know, sort of at least an intra-Afghan peace deal, if not -- if not sort of guarantees on those other fronts.

And then the one final thing I will say is that Pakistan has also come out and said that it does not want a precipitous international withdrawal. You know, the -- the prime minister wrote in (inaudible) this past weekend and it basically has said that it wants a U.S. presence maintained in Afghanistan until an intra-Afghan peace deal is reached no matter how long it might take. So that's notable as well.

MR. O'HANLON: Fantastic. So here's how I would proceed or suggest that we proceed in the remaining 15 minutes. We -- we've received about 20 questions from those of you who are part of this conversation watching and we're grateful for those. I've been reading through those. A lot of them I think have been addressed already, but I'm going to propose that there is one question in particular or maybe two that I would acknowledge we haven't yet gotten to, put those two questions on the table, and then hand things off to Vanda as I depart, and Vanda may want to add a couple of other questions from the mix as well. But it seems to me that one big question is to what extent in a future Afghanistan where the United States and NATO have pulled out most or all of their forces, to what extent can we use economic aid and money as leverage to induce the kind of behavior we might hope for out of the government that is largely composed of Taliban elements? So imagining a peace deal, imagining a -- a point at which we have seen some kind of a power sharing accord, but probably more on Taliban terms than on existing government terms, to what extent can we use the leverage of the fact that Afghanistan is currently receiving almost 10 billion dollars a year of all types of aid combined form the broader international community, use that as leverage even with the Taliban? And then the second question has to do with the role of other players, and I know Vanda and Madhi, we could not have better speakers on this question than the two of you. Vanda, you've spent a lot of time in regional talks increasing with the Chinese. Madiha you're an expert on Pakistan and you've touched already Madiha on the Pakistani role,

but as we envision again this, this vision of a new government in Afghanistan largely Taliban influenced or even dominated, to what extent can regional actors use their levers of trade and other such matters to try to get the kind of behavior and the kind of moderation that we all might wish for from that kind of a future government? With that question, Vanda, I'm going to hand the floor to you both to answer those questions and then of course to moderate and wrap the session. And thank you both for an excellent discussion so far.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: And Mike, thank you so much for your participation and your strong and powerful commentary and work in Afghanistan. Much of Mike's work, all of Mike's work is online so for those of you who want to get more from him as we are losing him now as he goes to moderate another very important event at Brookings, please log in to Mike's website for a lot of work on Afghanistan. Thank you, Mike.

Well, maybe what I'll do is Madiha take three minutes or so, four minutes to answer the two questions then hand it over to you and then we'll see whether we have a chance for another question.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: You know, I started -- I ended my comments about what U.S. means in Afghanistan by specifically talking about the financial political and diplomatic needs, all of which are significant and as of now, there is really no actor that has greater influence, whose tools of this kind are larger than that of the United States. But it is also little prospect that if the U.S. decided to abandon Afghanistan, something I certainly don't advocate, that any other actor would replace the scope of U.S. influence, although other actors' influence would of course significantly rise. Now the fact that U.S. influences launches in the roles of economic, financial, diplomatic, and political needs, doesn't mean that it is limited. And I go back to emphasizing that a lot of narratives about where U.S. policy should go assumes far greater influence and needs than I think is the reality, and that's really something that will be the hard reckoning in the years to come.

Now there is wide debate as to how susceptible the Taliban is to U.S. financial inducement or potentially punishment. Same for diplomatic. In my view, there is quite significant versatility. In my conversations with Taliban, (inaudible) there is constant steady messaging that the Taliban does not want the country to go back to the 1990s and that it very much wants to preserve U.S. economic aid. Now, by not going back to the 1990s, it means in my view largely the complete economic

degradation and devastation of the country. I think that it's very much an open-ended question as to what it would mean in any of its moderation of its positions on human rights and women's rights. I think that it's some possibility that the Taliban could live with an Iran-like system of a supra-authority with elections taking place underneath. The Taliban says that -- some members of the Taliban say that women could be ministers. The reality of course is that the Taliban prefers to negotiate a division of power without talking about substance, and one of the reasons is that the substance is highly conversely among Taliban members.

But I do believe that there is real interest in U.S. aid and real understanding that a foreign policy and economic posture of the 1990s would be devastating for the country. The United States and the international community need to seize on that and emphasize it. The Taliban should be flown to countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, to see what a country that observes some minimal human rights, democratic standards, women's rights, could economically be thriving even with a very strong influence of religion and perhaps dominant influence of religion in -- in the political system. So I do believe those are important tools. Those are real tools. Real tools add also signaling to the Taliban that it would be denied presence in diplomatic forums if it behaved in massive violations of women's rights, massive violations of human rights, if it simply wanted in a full spectrum of issues to go back to the 1990s.

A very important point related to that is that of course the official system is one thing. The reality of the ground is another thing. And that's already a massive problem in Afghanistan today. A lot of the benefits in terms of human rights, democracy, economic development, are enormously unequally distributed, principally centered in major airborne spaces, and in many rural areas the conditions of women are still fundamentally dependent on the male in the household, whether the male wants the woman to have education, to have access to employment, to be able to leave the household. That is also the case in urban spaces. It's still very father-husband dominant system, though there is more openness in -- in urban spaces and certainly many very impressive women in Afghanistan have played very significant roles in the development of the country. But the realities given today are not all just what's on the paper. And that can always be a massive issue in any kind of future government of how whatever commitments are made are in fact implemented on the ground and very hard choices than for the owners.

So in my view, those tools are real and important and need to be exercised. If the United States now or other members of the international communities can signal that they would not provide any kind of international assistance to a regime that is -- that has a very strong Taliban presence and that significantly changes the politics with our dispensation, it might mean that they eliminate the last source of leverage once international troops are out. At the same time, exercising that leverage is crucial to shaping what's agreed to, to shaping behavior on the ground. But this leverage is not unlimited. The most important leverage is military force and the military force was not able to accomplish in 20 years what Madiha called guaranteeing those issues. There is no prospect that open-ended military force will be able to guarantee that.

Now, let me come a little bit to the -- the countries. I -- I said before that all important regional powers with the exception of India, have made their own peace with the Taliban. They prefer the coalition government, perhaps a government that is not dominated by the Taliban, but nonetheless, they have made their own arrangements and developed very robust relationships making judgment that if need be, they would be able to coexist with the Taliban regime. And the Taliban has been very sensuously courting Russia, China, Iran, and -- and telling them that it will guarantee their counterterrorism or economic interests, that will not attack Chinese economic investments, in fact protect them, that it will attack the Islamic state in Khorasan as it currently does, that it would not brutalize the Shia minority in the same way that it did in the 1990s, credibility of which is an issue, but has been the -- the posturing. India here is the big -- the big question, whether India will develop its own channels through the Taliban.

Now, if the negotiations simply collapse and we are back into a state of an intensified civil war, the hedging behavior on the top of these actors to intensify, many of them are already providing weapons and intelligence to a whole set of militias and power brokers. The question mark, which of the power brokers believe, which would stay and fight the Taliban, which would simply (inaudible) which would switch to the Taliban. Many are already switching to the Taliban and there are very many robust negotiations between the Taliban and a whole set of regional power brokers quite apart from what's happening in Doha.

But it's very likely that a civil war will bring back militias and with that, real -- real

intensification of the suffering of the country and making it even harder to have some sort of acceptable stable peace resolution. Madiha, over to you.

MS. AFZAL: Thanks, Vanda. So I think that -- that covered a great deal and -- and highlighted some of the points that I would like to make as well, and I'll -- I'll talk essentially about the aid aspect and -- and using aid as leverage. The most potent sort of source of leverage we have is boots on the ground, as I have maintained through this discussion. And before leaving, we should use that leverage before leaving completely to try to ensure an intra-Afghan peace deal is reached and some of what we want to see in that region is achieved in that intra-Afghan peace deal. The leverage we can have with boots on the ground is far greater than the leverage we would have with aid, and that's for a couple of reasons. One reason is actually that the Taliban now reportedly has many more sources of revenue potentially than just you know, relying on the U.S. Of course, the U.S. -- the U.S.'s aid would be something that the -- but there's new reporting that suggests that the Taliban has been diversifying and increasing its sources of revenue and might be -- might be in a financially sort of sustainable position for a little bit. So our potential for using aid as leverage, I think is -- is limited. And -- and again, I would argue that -- that the forced posture is -- is something that we can use to just at least achieve an intra-Afghan peace deal.

Now, the other thing I just want to mention, and this has been alluded to before as well is you know, sort of the question of whether the Taliban has changed and whether or not we should -- we should sort of hope for better than sort of the -- the quagmire of the 1990s. And I think there are some indications on the ground of that, and in particular with the way the Taliban is proceeding in a very sort of disciplined manner as a political group with these peace negotiations, that while it has not you know, while it may not be what we want to be in charge of -- of Afghanistan, it has moved from what it was. It is not the Taliban of the 1990s, and so perhaps we can take a little bit of comfort you know, as we come towards the close of this session in -- in that fact, that we are not negotiating with the terrorist of the 1990s, that something somewhere has shifted in the process of the last 19 years. So that's something you know, important to remember as well. Vanda, you're muted.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Yes, thank you. I -- I just saw it. Well, we thank you very much Madiha. We are close to the hour. Many questions came but I think that we have addressed many of the

questions in our opening remarks. I want to very much thank Madiha for her insight and for her commitment to important values of the United States, the more aggressive women's rights, human rights, for her insights in linking it to what U.S. policy should look like. Like in Mike's case, Madiha's work is on our Brookings website and I highly encourage everyone to follow her on Twitter and importantly, read her work. I thank you all for joining, participating in the questions, watching it. Afghanistan is a very important issue for the United States. It's an important regional issue and as I argued, it's an important issue for the state of the United States internal health and for U.S. geopolitical posture. So it's not an issue that will go away. We will have many more conversations, many more events, a lot more writing, and look forward to engaging with all of you. Thank you.

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