

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

THE TALIBAN TAKE AFGHANISTAN

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## PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

In a just ten days in August, Taliban forces seized control of all the provincial capitals in Afghanistan and Kabul, its capital city, as American military forces began the final phase of their planned exit from the country after 20 years of presence. Scenes of chaos at Kabul's airport competed with an uncertain calm on the capital's streets, while a fresh contingent of U.S. troops arrived to safeguard the evacuation of American, allied, and Afghan civilians.

On this episode of the Brookings Cafeteria, I speak with a leading expert on the forces and issues that have shaped Afghanistan over the last two decades and will continue to do so. Vanda Felbab-Brown is a senior fellow in Foreign Policy and the Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology at Brookings, and also is director of the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors. Her expert insights on what has just happened in Afghanistan help make sense of an incredibly complex situation and offer some ideas of what to expect moving forward.

Our conversation took place on Monday, August 16, just the day after Taliban forces entered Kabul.

Also on this episode, Governance Studies Senior Fellow Molly Reynolds explains what's happening in Congress in the context of the dramatic and dynamic situation in Afghanistan, including attention to an increased effort to resettle refugees from there.

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First up, here's Molly Reynolds with What's Happening in Congress.

REYNOLDS: I'm Molly Reynolds, a senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution.

When the House and Senate departed for their respective August recesses, the most pressing issues awaiting them on their return were domestic ones. The Senate had cleared both its bipartisan infrastructure bill and a budget resolution that will serve as a framework for upcoming budget reconciliation bill containing many of Democrats' major domestic priorities this fall.

The House, meanwhile, departed with likely plans to return early from its usual summer break to take up the Senate-passed budget blueprint as well as voting rights legislation named for the late Representative John Lewis.

Tensions among groups of relatively more centrist and relatively more progressive House Democrats over the timing of action on the infrastructure measure, the budget resolution, and the ultimate reconciliation bill were emerging, and indeed continued to confront house Democratic leaders as they plan for the coming weeks.

But this focus on domestic policy, which indeed has been the major emphasis of the Biden administration in the first eight months of his presidency, was interrupted by events in Afghanistan where the Taliban seized control of the country more quickly than public reports had anticipated in advance of the completion of the planned withdrawal of U.S. troops.

These current developments come after two decades of Congress being quite deferential to the president on foreign policy, especially in terms of the conduct of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and under the general heading of the Global War on Terror. Two authorizations for the use of military force, one pass in 2001 and one pass in 2002, have been used by presidents of

both parties to support a wide range of military operations, and Congress by and large, has been keen to let them do so.

Even when Congress does put pressure on the executive branch to take certain action, it can be limited in its ability to guarantee compliance, especially in the foreign policy arena where the president has an advantage both in terms of information over the legislative branch and in terms of Congress' willingness to give him broad latitude.

Take, for example, the Special Immigrant Visa program, which Congress created first in 2006 to provide a pathway to legal permanent residence for individuals who worked with the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has long been beset by lengthy wait times in the application process. In 2013, Congress required that the State Department complete processing of an application under the program within nine months. But according to the Migration Policy Institute, the State Department has never reliably met that standard. And as of July 2001, the average processing time was 703 days.

This is just one of countless examples of requirements put in place by Congress for the executive branch that the latter either cannot or does not want to meet. And unless Congress wants to escalate a conflict with the executive branch by, for example, threatening to defund presidential priorities, it will often find itself at a disadvantage.

Another challenge facing Congress is that while the House and Senate are capable of acting quickly when they want to, the initial legislative responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 demonstrates as well, institutional instincts often cause members to default to a regular rhythm of legislating that occurs over the course of a year. For example, when asked earlier this year about legislation to increase the number of available visas for Afghan allies, the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Michael McCaul, said that he expected

Congress would fix that problem in the annual defense authorization bill, a measure not usually passed until years' end. While Congress did ultimately accelerate legislation addressing some of the issues related to visas for Afghan partners and passed it in July, McCaul's comment is illustrative of how Congress can have a tendency to fall back on its established ways of doing things.

As members of Congress individually and collectively determine how to respond to the consequences of the American withdrawal, one particular group of members will be worth paying attention to: members in both parties who are veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or who were involved in diplomatic efforts related to one of the conflicts. In April, for example, a group of Republican and Democratic House members, led by Seth Moulton, an Iraq veteran from Massachusetts and Jason Crow, an Iraq and Afghanistan veteran from Colorado, created the Honoring our Promises working group, to advocate for a more aggressive effort to resettle Afghan allies in the United States.

On the whole, the number of veterans serving in Congress is down from earlier eras that followed more widespread military service in the early- and mid-20th century. But members of Congress' backgrounds are often an important determinant of which issues they choose to be especially active on in the House and Senate, and post-2001 military or diplomatic service is proving to be no exception.

After nearly 20 years in Afghanistan, the American public's attention has largely turned elsewhere, and indeed, in the coming months, Congress' own focus is likely to return to domestic policy issues. After all, one of the more enduring patterns in the two decades since the September 11th attacks is that foreign policy is often left to the president. And it is indeed *not* what's happening in Congress.

DEWS: You can find more editions of What's Happening Congress on our Soundcloud channel, [soundcloud.com/brookings-institution](https://soundcloud.com/brookings-institution). And now, here's my interview with Vanda Felbab-Brown.

Vanda, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria.

FELBAB-BROWN: My pleasure.

DEWS: So, Vanda, as you know, when we started discussing and as I started preparing for this interview last week, the conditions on the ground on Afghanistan were vastly different than what they are here today, Monday, August 16th. As people are listening to this, a few more days will have elapsed. It was quite a spectacular weekend in terms of developments on the ground. I think everyone knows that the Taliban occupy and control Kabul, all of the provincial capitals. Can you add anything to what you know what's happening on the ground? And also, I think more broadly speaking, did this unfold faster than you expected?

FELBAB-BROWN: So, let me start with the second question and I'll come to what's happening on the ground now. The collapse of the government and the security forces essentially in the last phase and 10 days is extraordinary. There is simply no expert, government official that has anticipated that. I am one of the people who for years have been pointing out the deficiencies and critical problems of the Afghan security services. The last chapter of my book, "Aspiration and Ambivalence," that's about Afghanistan, strategies and realities of counterinsurgency and state building in Afghanistan, that came out at the end of 2012, pointed out all the very same problems that brought Afghan security services down. But even I, knowing well the problems, knowing that for a decade they had not been addressed, that the Afghan government did not fix those problems, did not think that they would collapse in 10 days.

That one additional element to that, of course, is that the Afghan government for the past month and a half was hoping that somehow it would be saved by militias. There were other experts amplifying that that voice. Again, I was skeptical about that because the Taliban dealt very effectively, decimated the militias that emerged in Afghanistan between 2012 and 2015. At the time, two of the militias were seen as an inflection point as the U.S. ticket out of Afghanistan, as a way to defeat the Taliban. And instead, the Taliban has defeated the militias. But once again, the strength of the militias has turned out actually minimal, absolutely flimsy.

So, all of this speaks about both the deep rot and hollowness of the Afghan security forces and the government that the United States has spent 20 years building, the corruption in them, and the absolutely minimal confidence of the Afghan people in their security services and the government.

Now, what's happening on the ground? Let's start with what's happening in Kabul. The government has fled Kabul. This includes the president, obviously, who fled yesterday and many of his key ministers and advisers. The Taliban is in charge of the city, with the exception of part of the Kabul Airport that is controlled by the U.S. military and evacuating U.S. embassy personnel and U.S. citizens. And presumably at some point, this will be one mechanism for also removing Afghans who are vulnerable, who fear the Taliban, those who will have special visa access. The images from the airport have been heart wrenching, people just desperate to get out, really massively fearing the Taliban and the future that lies ahead for them. And the airport has been chaos. Just today, apparently, seven people died at the airport through the chaos and disorganization there.

Elsewhere in the city, the situation is fortunately much better. The Taliban is effectively imposing order, patrolling the streets. So far, the Taliban has not resorted to looting. I hear from

many friends who are in various parts of Kabul that the Taliban patrols so far have been polite and respectful, preventing looting, but not, for example, checking cars, looking to pull people out. Although there are also rumors going on that the Taliban is searching for some members of Parliament. So, at least on the streets, there is not revenge, retaliation, brutality, or street-to-street fighting, which was a possibility and it remains a possibility down the road. So, the fact that control is being imposed, at least for now, avoids bloodshed.

The final element to add to that, however, is that Kabul also over the past 10 days has received the very many internally displaced people from across Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands of people. And many of them are simply sleeping on the streets, in the park, women and children, they don't have access to food or shelter. So, very rapidly, the Taliban will need to be working, perhaps, presumably with international actors like the United Nations, in distributing just basic humanitarian aid to those people.

Elsewhere in the country, the situation is more complex. In some places, the Taliban has engaged in brutality and revenge killings. It has sent women away from university. Just today, the Taliban spokesman said that women will not be allowed to go to university, they'll only be allowed to have high school education. Very, very distressing element that the international community will need to push back against. So, the Taliban has been trying to get basic service functionality in various parts of the country going, even demanding that people return back to work. But it has in various places also engaged in brutality, repression, and is imposing, obviously, an order that is very rigid and that is much more authoritarian.

DEWS: I want to remind listeners again that we're recording this on Monday, August 16th. And there's a lot of issues in what you just said that I want to circle back to in a minute. But first, Vanda, could you just remind listeners how we arrived at this moment, kind of in recent



history over the last year or so with the previous administration's agreement with the Taliban in Doha, February 2020, and then the Biden administration, the new Biden administration's implementation of that deal to withdraw U.S. troops?

FELBAB-BROWN: So, for the past 20 years, the United States and the international community, NATO partners, have sought to build a functional and reasonably effective accountable state in Afghanistan, with many different components of civilian administration as well as military, after the Taliban that was in power in Afghanistan from '96 through 2001 destroyed the country's administrative systems, institutions, and sought to return the country to a 9th-century-like system and organizations.

Now throughout this 20 years, the Taliban was running an insurgency, and the insurgency was picking up steam and getting more and more powerful. And the United States and the international community went through several experiments of how to deal with the insurgency. The George W. Bush administration that sent the U.S. forces into Afghanistan to hunt down al-Qaida and remove the Taliban from power, very rapidly got diverted into Iraq and significantly under-resourced the mission and relied on warlords who turned out very problematic both for the military operations and for running the government.

The Obama administration deployed U.S. military forces at a very augmented level. Two-hundred thousand U.S. military forces and another fifty-thousand NATO forces. After that didn't break the Taliban, the Obama administration then reduced its presence and wanted to walk away, wanted to pullout from Afghanistan militarily in 2014. And it came very close to that happening, except for the fact that ISIS was sweeping Iraq and was on the doorstep of Baghdad. And it was those developments in Iraq that stayed the hand of the Obama administration to remove U.S. forces out of the country. And the Obama administration at that point came to believe that the

primary mission was accomplished, bin Laden was dead, al-Qaida was decimated, and that there was no prospect for the United States winning in the intensifying insurgency, civil war with the Taliban. Nonetheless, it didn't happen.

Then comes the Trump administration, and the Trump administration wants to differentiate itself from the Obama administration. And although many fewer U.S. forces are in the country at this point, only 20,000 as opposed to a 100,000, it says there will be no timelines for how long we stay, it will be all conditions based. But President Trump doesn't believe it. He says in August 2016, under pressure from his key military advisers, but he doesn't believe it a minute and systematically afterwards tries to order U.S. troops out. And there are these tweets constantly, the U.S. troops will be out by this Christmas, U.S. troops will be out by that Christmas.

So, finally, we get the stage to where he authorizes negotiations between the United States and the Taliban with the explicit purpose of getting U.S. troops out. And that culminates in the Doha February 2020 agreement that has essentially four core components. The one is the U.S. promises to remove all of its forces from Afghanistan by May 1st in exchange for the Taliban promising to act against international terrorism and not allow international terrorism out of Afghanistan against the United States and its allies.

The Taliban also agrees to stop all violence against U.S. troops and maintains that rather scrupulously, with very few limited exceptions, until the current period, that there has not been violence by the Taliban and certainly through the May 1st deadline. Now, there is hope that this agreement not to attack U.S. forces would translate into a general cease fire to allow the Taliban and the Afghan government to negotiate. That was something that U.S. delegation led by Ambassador Khalilzad sought to negotiate but never achieved. The Taliban never promised that.

And the fourth element there was that negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban would start. It took them months to start after the Doha agreement, but they were immediately very slow and didn't really go anywhere because the Afghan government hated the negotiations. It did not want to concede any kind of power, any kind of political arrangements to the Taliban, hoping instead that the United States would remain in Afghanistan with an open ended, years to come, military commitment to fight the Taliban. And the Taliban didn't want the negotiations because it was waiting out the deadline of May 1st of U.S. forces leaving, by which time it would be far easier for it to battle the Afghan government.

And their political positions about the viewpoint of what kind of regime in Afghanistan, what kind of social, political organization, are of course diametrically opposed. The Taliban all along also held a lot of personal animosity toward President Ashraf Ghani and many of his ministries, and he feared that the Taliban would blame them and try to hold him accountable for the extraordinary corruption in Afghanistan.

Now, throughout those 20 years, the United States never resolved two key issues. It never managed to dissuade Pakistan from providing multifaceted support for the Taliban—weapons, money, advisers, shelter, no matter what pressure, threats, economic promises, or strategic relationship it deployed. And it never managed to persuade Afghan politicians from engaging in just terrible governance, governance that was always centering on corruption, predatory, rapacious attitudes toward governance, that was about personal parochial interests, constant politicking, and never putting the national interest and the well-being of the Afghan people ahead of those personal ambitions. And the combination of these two, and especially and acutely the miserable governance in Afghanistan down to the extraordinary rot of the Afghan security forces, of course, culminated in the collapse of the past 10 days.

DEWS: Well, you said that the Taliban, one of the things they agreed to in that deal was to stop all violence against U.S. troops, at least through the time, the deadline agreed to by the U.S. side. And you said that they did. But did they meet that part of their agreement to act against terrorism, to cease any support for terrorism?

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, that's a highly contested dimension and it depends on what the specifics of the action against terrorism are. So, there are these secret annexes to the treaty beyond the four large points that are known, and I and others have not seen the details of those of those annexes. If the expectation is that the Taliban would round up al-Qaida remnants in Afghanistan, arrest them, put them in prison, or hand them over to the United States, if the expectation is the Taliban would sever all connections with terrorist groups and expel them, the Taliban certainly did not do that.

I think that was always a bridge too far, and to force the Taliban into that would have required a fundamentally different state of the battlefield. This might have been achievable bargaining with the Taliban in 2002 or 2003. But by the time the deal was taking place in 2020, the Taliban was a very powerful insurgency at its most powerful moment, and it's even more powerful today.

Now, what we have not seen is any kind of terrorist attacks out of Afghanistan enabled by the Taliban. But one can argue that that's because U.S. forces, special operations forces, counterterrorism forces, have been there. A few years ago, a big al-Qaida camp was still found in Afghanistan. The Taliban has acted very resolutely and determinedly against the Islamic State in Khorasan. That's a vicious terrorist groups engaged in lots of brutality and seeking to whip up sectarian Sunni-Shia violence in Afghanistan. The Taliban has been fighting them, but it resolutely has been critical in diminishing their power. That's something that the United States

has been pleased with, China and Russia. And there is certainly expectation that the Taliban will continue doing so. Now, in this case, that serves the Taliban's interest. The Taliban doesn't like IS-K and sees it as an enemy.

I don't think you will see anything of the resoluteness against al-Qaida, particularly as for years now those who are members of al-Qaida have married into the Taliban, that they're married to families of the Taliban. And so, for the Taliban to go and round up their brothers-in-law or sons-in-law is socially very difficult, and I don't think achievable.

Now, the Taliban has been making lots of counterterrorism promises, not just to the United States, but to other actors, to Russia, China, and Iran, but China specifically. The issues are quite parallel like with the United States. In the north of the country, including in the province called Badakhshan that borders China, Uyghur Taliban units operate. And of course, the Chinese government has engaged in terrible repression against the Uyghur population broadly and designates a militant group called ETIM as a terrorist organization. And so, China has demanded that the Taliban does not allow any kind of support to go to ETIM specifically or to the bigger population more broadly. The Taliban appears to have promised it, but it doesn't mean that it has rounded up its Uyghur units, disbanded them, arrested them.

So, China, again, is in the same position as the U.S. But I think that the maximum that it's realistic will be that the Taliban doesn't allow acts of terrorism but will not really suppress some of those groups. It will continue suppressing IS-K, but not groups like its Uyghur units.

One last comment on the terrorism issue. In its taking over the country, the Taliban has been liberating prisoners from prisons, has been opening the gates from prisons across the country, including at the Bagram airport. And the Bagram airport, in particular, has been housing some of the most hardcore al-Qaida, Islamic State in Khorasan terrorists. And it's not

clear whether the Taliban engaged in any kind of screening in whom they let out. I hear reports from some prisons in Afghanistan that the Taliban is screening and kept some of these other terrorist groups in prison elsewhere. I hear that they just simply opened the gates and let anyone out without screening. And I keep hearing both comments about Bagram. Obviously impossible to verify which comment is correct. But if the Taliban just opened the gates and let Islamic State hardcore fighters out, that will have not pleased in any way. And not just the United States, but Russia, China, and Iran as well.

DEWS: I'd like to say on this issue of the terms of the 2020 Doha deal for just a moment longer, because it bears heavily on some of the commentary that we're hearing today and especially from critics of President Biden. And let's be honest, I think they would have criticized him either way. And in fact, in the spring when he announced that he was going to withdraw troops beyond the May 1st deadline, he was roundly criticized by former President Trump and some of his supporters. But now we're also hearing criticism that Biden did not have to execute the terms of the February 2020 Doha deal when he came in office because the Taliban maybe weren't keeping their end of the bargain. What do you make of the possibility that President Biden, a new president coming into office, could have altered the terms of the deal with the Taliban the previous administration struck?

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, much of this debate that the U.S. didn't have to comply because the Taliban violated, for example, the counterterrorism protocol is sort of like a discussion as if this was being arbitrated in some way in an international court. And the lawyer for the United States and the lawyer for the Taliban was presenting its case. And then a judge would rule whether the U.S. needs to go out or not. I mean, regardless of however justified in terms of the terms of the deal the United States was, the reality was that if it were to overstay the

May 1st deadline, it would end up back in the war with the Taliban. The deal ultimately was about removing the United States from 20 years of war with the Taliban. And so, legally, morally, from a counterterrorism perspective, if you would like, there were to be found plenty of reasons to say the May 1st deadline does matter. But from simply are you in war with the Taliban, yes or no, it mattered fundamentally.

I think that the Biden administration had the capacity to negotiate longer extension than just September. And I was urging at the time that the deal is renegotiated for the United States to leave in December of 2021 rather than at the end of the summer. I think that was feasible. But the Taliban would not have agreed to extend it for a year, two years, five years. Any kind of that extension meant we are back to war. And it would have meant the Taliban would start attacking U.S. and NATO bases.

And that would have had either one of two consequences. Either the forces would become completely hunkered down on bases, not being able to really get out and taking fire from missiles. Or, with a small force of 2,500 soldiers, President Biden would feel compelled to increase the force. So, we would be flying thousands of U.S. soldiers back into an open-ended conflict. And an open-ended conflict where there were absolutely no prospects that the fundamental dynamics would change, that the Afghan government would start behaving better, that the rot in the Afghan security forces would start being addressed, and that the strategic momentum would be changed.

This was already the fourth change to the war because the previous attempts have failed. And yet you have consistently debilitating, disastrous governance and a Taliban ascendant. So ,the option really was not we will stay for two or three years happily with a slightly augmented force or five years, and then somehow the Taliban will be defeated, the government wouldn't

collapse, we wouldn't be in essentially the outcome of the situation that we are now. That wasn't the choice, that's simply fantasy, that those who advocated never explained how that pathway would take place. The choice was [ ] with the fall of the government and the Taliban coming to power, although, you know, we can talk about the tactics that it didn't have to be as disastrous as it turned out, but the fundamental outcome would not have been different. Or we have to stay and fight for five years, 10 years, 20 years, however long it takes.

And the Afghan government kept hoping and hoping and hoping until the last minute that we will stay, that Afghanistan would be too important to fail. They kept beguiling themselves for over a decade that Afghanistan was the fulcrum of global geopolitics, that it was the place where the competition between China, Russia, and the United States would be resolved and determined. And that meant that the United States would be anchored there for years and years to come.

And just one addition here on the tactics. I think that there is more justification to criticize the Biden administration for the some of the tactical choices that were made in the spring, not simply regarding the slow preparation of the Afghan military forces, which, frankly, 20 years of preparation, would two months more of signaling really made the difference?; not simply in terms of the preparation for removing vulnerable Afghans out of the country, but clearly the preparation was none; but also other tactical mistakes and some of the diplomacy that was unfolding between February and, really, May, June of this year. And again, I thought there was scope for negotiating the extension to the end of this year, not just September.

I even heard it that the Taliban were actually in Doha meeting international delegations when the president made the announcement and they were stunned. The Taliban did not really think that they would get that rapid a deadline for withdrawal. And they were utterly disappointed because here they thought they would have a few months of bargaining. What they



really wanted is to bargain something like the U.S. would leave in November or December and we will get visa sanctions on us removed. And so, when the announcement came, they were like, what are you going bargain with? I mean, they were just astounded. And frankly, I think they are astounded with the way they won in 10 days in terms of the military campaign.

But all of this is about tactics. Those tactics matter. They influence lives of people. They influence whether seven people die in Kabul airport and the imagery coming out. But none of this would influence or change the basic trend that the Taliban was coming to power, was going to be the dominant political actor, and was going to profoundly change the political and social dispensation in the country unfortunately that was lost long ago when we didn't resolve the two core issues: how to make Pakistan stop supporting the Taliban and most importantly, how to make Afghan politicians and leaders care about the national interest and their people as opposed to their narrow politics and pockets.

DEWS: Vanda, you wrote a series of posts that were published on the Brookings website in June and you looked at four scenarios for Afghanistan's future. But I want to focus on what you said about the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, because you said that was one of the most crucial factors in determining Afghan's future. And you talked about in this discussion the rot in the Afghan security forces. You mentioned that they had 20 years to get ready for this. And what is it that people should understand about why the U.S. and NATO mission to train Afghan security forces seems to have failed? Those security forces seem to have not, as far as I know, put up a fight, much of a fight at all anywhere. Definitely not in Kabul as the Taliban advance happened. And also related to that, does the just utter collapse of the Afghan national security forces demonstrate the correctness of President Biden's decision to commit to the troop withdrawal?

FELBAB-BROWN: Let me start with the second question. Yes, again, the tactics could have been much better, but to me, just the utter hollowness of the Afghan security forces is yet another demonstration that staying on for another five years, 10 years, would not have made a difference and that it was appropriate to focus on other geostrategic issues. One of the things that needs to be understood also is that, of course, 20 years of U.S. military and state-building effort is far more than the United States has dedicated to many other parts of the world. But it's also taken place when the geopolitical situation was very different. It started well before the rise of China and Russia and the aggressiveness of Russia, and it also started well before COVID. And its tremendous domestic impact of the Biden administration highlights far more pressing global issues that influence the lives of billions of people, everyone on the planet like climate.

So, the basic strategic judgment, in my view, is the correct one, even though the emotional pain of seeing Afghan women to live in the far more difficult conditions now is devastating. And it's been very painful. The humanitarian situation will clearly be worse. The lives of many people that the U.S. made promises to will be dramatically worse. And that's painful. That's terrible. But ultimately, the U.S. policy needs to be based about U.S. geostrategic and domestic interests.

Now, why did the U.S.-NATO training end up in such disappointing results? Well, I think that are sort of multiple answers and the most determinative one is the one that we mentioned several times over and over, which the quality of the Afghan leadership. That doesn't simply rest on only sort of the national government in Kabul. That also applies to the quality of leadership from captains and lieutenants all the way through generals. And getting Afghan officers to put the interests of their units, of the Afghan security forces ahead of their own individual had often been a struggle. There have been some exceptional officers, very

committed, very capable in the Afghan forces, but very many people were in it for money, for their political interest but hedging in multiple ways.

Logistics and support were another key problems, logistics in particular ended up being enormously pervaded by corruption and parochial affinities. And so, Afghan units would be essentially starving or existing on kind of rice and potato rations for months and months because officers elsewhere would steal the supplies that were meant to head to them. And they'll just steal them and sometimes sell them directly to the Taliban.

Next, the third dimension is that the United States and NATO set out to build a force that was very modern, that looked like a U.S. modern, Western force. And people are now pointing out that that was a bridge too far, that the force that was being built could have been far less modern in terms of equipment and structures and systems, and that the less modern force might have been far more viable and might have found it far easier to adapt to the inevitable moment when the United States and NATO would leave.

And finally, I would say, though, that there was also a kind of systematic downplaying of the problems that were known and exaggerations of the strains, whether they were because of morale and the fear of disclosing the state of the problems or they existed because of institutional reasons, promotion reasons. I know many majors, colonels on the U.S. side who at the time might have been captains who were deployed to build the kandaks, the battalion of the Afghan army, and they were systematically discouraged from reporting their problems. They would be sending assessments that 20 percent of the kandak is AWOL, that out of those soldiers that competence is at tremendously low, they smoke hash and Belgian opium. And yet those reports would be then sent back, and they would be told, you really don't want to be reporting this kind of stuff, ordered to give the give the kandaks much higher rating, much higher assessment.

And we had similar limitations on the civilian side for civilian administrators, USAID administrators, of civilian aid. It was enormously problematic to altogether impossible not to execute the project or to report the projects didn't work, that they collapsed because the Afghans didn't have the capacity or because there was so much corruption or because the structural problems were too intense. Failure was not allowed and was systematically discouraged from being reported until, of course, the entire project turned out a flimsy house of cards.

DEWS: I'd like to focus now on the issue of women and girls in Afghanistan. You talked about the emotional pain of seeing what's going on with women and girls now that the Taliban have taken over. You talked about women have been denied access to universities that they were going to. I mean it's been 20 years; a whole generation of Afghan and girls have not lived under the Taliban. Can you talk about your concerns when it comes to the rights and the gains that women in Afghanistan have made over the years?

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, obviously, the Taliban coming to power will mean significant reductions in the freedom of opportunities for Afghan girls and women, and that's very painful. I believe I said that the luckiest outcomes that we were looking at is an Iran-like regime. I'll elaborate on that. And many of the changes that will take place will be both changes in how women in Afghanistan have practiced experience that they've made to their lives, as well as in the broader legal frameworks that exist in the Afghan constitution that have guaranteed seats for women, there was strong pressure to include women in government.

Many of these dimensions were often not executed in practice, and you spoke about the fact that a generation of Afghan women now live in very different conditions. Well, that's true for women in some areas. The Taliban has been ruling parts of the country for years and years. And even in areas where the Taliban has not ruled the country, in many rural areas, local social

mores often prevailed. So, it would often be local men, not just Pashtun, who would be selling their daughters as wives, even as young as five or six. This was not Taliban behavior. This could have been driven by the males in the family. For many Afghan women over the past 20 years, life really depended on how the male relatives would treat them, whether their husbands, brothers, or fathers would allow them access to the education that the new system enabled, whether it would allow them access to hospitals. Domestic violence is very, very present throughout the country and was regardless of whether the area was under Taliban rule or not.

DEWS: I recall you wrote about that with Brookings's President John Allen in an essay last year published on our 19A, 19th Amendment, series. I'll post a link to that in the show notes.

FELBAB-BROWN: Absolutely. Now, nonetheless, a segment of women could experience a life that was full of opportunities and unprecedented economic and political freedoms and to some extent, even personal choice freedoms. For many of them, the order that's coming is absolutely horrible and terrifying. And we have seen instances, for example, of the Taliban forcing women to marry Taliban soldiers. It's very hard to judge the pervasiveness of this. It's clearly one of the issues that many Afghan women fear the most. I hear stories of their fathers looking for the husbands for their daughters very rapidly, that there is a frenzy to marry off daughters before the Taliban come knocking. Even just that fear obviously is terrible.

In some parts of the country in the west, where the Taliban have taken over in recent weeks, they issued edicts that women cannot leave the house without male guardians. That's one of the most debilitating rules and one that the international community should strongly push against because that really limits access to health care, food, schooling. That's a very debilitating situation.

So much of how the doctrines and mores are both determined and executed on the local level varies. And one of the things that will be, I think, a very important dimension of the Taliban regime is that there will be great variation in local execution of various rules, not simply regarding women. And depending how much the community has strength and capacity to negotiate with the Taliban, there might be loosening. Several years ago, for example, in some places like Ghazni, the Taliban shut down girls' schools and the community was very upset, mobilized and negotiated with the Taliban to reopen the schools. The Taliban did so but placed their supervisors in the classroom and would choose what education is appropriate for both girls and boys, and particularly girls.

So, there are limits to how much a local community can push to loosen some of the restraints and some dogmas that the Taliban will be imposing, and it cannot be just the local community. You spoke about the essay with President John Allen. We speak in the essay about the leverage that the international community can use to try to shape the Taliban's behavior. This leverage includes access to international aid, financial flows, providing visas to the Taliban government officials or denying them, recognizing the Taliban government or not, allowing the Taliban access to international fora, international conferences, international organizations or prohibiting them. None of this is leverage that's enormously powerful. None of this leverage has the capacity to make the Taliban into women's rights and democracy supporting actors.

And the leverage is weakened by many things. It's weakened by the speed with which the Taliban took over. It's weakened by the fact that the utter collapse of both the Afghan security forces and militias means that the Taliban is hyped up on victory, flush with adrenaline and ambition, but also has to ground reality constraints in what kind of rules they will issue and how they share power. And it's also weakened by the fact that issues like women's rights and human

rights are of limited focus and interest to countries like China, Russia, and Iran. And so there will be a big division in the international community, clearly, in how those issues are linked to incentives, punitive punishments, and positive inducements. But nonetheless, even though the leverage is limited, the United States, Europe, Australia, and its Western allies, and as much as countries like China could be mobilized, should be using the leverage to try to shape the Taliban.

Again, I think that if you set as our hope and objective that women will have all the rights as they will have up to now, then people will be disappointed that that's the reality I don't think is available. I think we should be pressing for things like allowing women access to universities. Just the statement today should be immediately pushed back, and the Taliban should be said, you won't get the money that the U.S. just froze or even a portion of the money if you don't change that. Yes, it will have to be single-sex schools. Women will have to wear hijab, maybe even burqa. But that should be one of the issues we bargain with, demanding that women have access outside of the household to health care, to food, to at least some sort of jobs without the male guardian, another really important red line to bargain about.

But again, I think that unfortunately, if we end up with Iran-like the regime in terms of domestic political and social dispensation, in terms of also political arrangement with the Taliban Supreme Council, but perhaps some power changing underneath in the best scenario through elections of the executive and a parliament—if they even have a parliament—those are some of the best outcomes that we are looking at. But I want to emphasize that staying another two, three years, three years, or five years, would not get us to a better outcome.

DEWS: Earlier in our conversation, you talked about the possibility of continued fighting down the road in Afghanistan, but as we're thinking about the Taliban regime consolidating and questions of international leverage, we're thinking now about the Taliban regime operating at a

level of the de facto, de jure government of Afghanistan—I mean, is it a done deal or is the Taliban, as it's consolidating now, going to be under threat in the coming weeks or months internally? I mean, I've heard talk of the son of a former famous commander, Massoud, talking about how he's going to resist.

FELBAB-BROWN: Yeah, well, Massoud's son in particular, I think, has really very limited leverage and capacity. And the idea that the Panjshiris, that's the group that he represents, could provide more than any kind of sort of limited nuisance, law enforcement nuisance, for the Taliban is just not in the cards in any way for months and years to come. And we would have to see really dramatic other developments in the country first.

The Taliban might over time be facing uprisings and challenges, particularly if it becomes too unresponsive to inputs from local communities. If it starts brutalizing entire minorities, for example, the Shia Hazaras, then it's very possible that Iran will try to activate its cadres, the Fatemiyoun, which is essentially an Iranian built Shia militia, and that could pose the most severe threat to the Taliban, really more severe right now than any kind of threat coming out of the Panjshir.

So, there are several sources of where down the road the Taliban could be facing problems. I would say the most significant one is the possibility of future Taliban factionalization. After they are running the country for a while, they will be demanding payoffs. The Taliban has seen its mid-level commanders, military commanders, rise in power, become quite independently wealthy on local economies, and demanding responsiveness from the Taliban leadership. How that plays out down the road is one of the big issues, how capable the Taliban is in maintaining control over particularly mid-level commanders. So, internal fictionalization down the road is far more real threat than Panjshiri militias right now.



The second factor is how the Taliban will be able to maintain income and resources for the country, for the government and its administration, for its fighters, and for the soldiers of the Afghan security forces—they have surrendered, they handed their weapons over to the Taliban, and they're unemployed. And the entire budget of the Afghan security forces, four billion, has been paid by the United States. Well, it's very hard to imagine the Congress authorizing paying for the Taliban army. And so how is the Taliban going to be paying its own fighters and how it's going to be paying all those fighters who are laid off, don't have jobs? The reason they joined the army in the first place is because they were landless and didn't have a job. They will be potential sources of banditry, marauding, or existing great economic privation. So that's another source of insecurity, instability that over time could build up to a more systemic challenge for the Taliban.

And the third factor is how Taliban manages its relationship with its neighbors and regional countries, particularly Iran, China, and Russia. China doesn't really have militias in Afghanistan, doesn't have power brokers that have access to militias. Russia has cultivated key power brokers and have provided money, intelligence, and weapons to their militias as much as it provided money and weapons to the Taliban. It hedged. But those power brokers pulled it, ran away, they were overrun, and they are now in Central Asia. But Russia could over time, if the Taliban doesn't take care of its counter terrorism interests, try to seek to cultivate and reactivate those new militia forces.

But Iran is really the most powerful actor here. If the Taliban crosses Iran and the relations, the warm relations, between them fall apart along sectarian Sunni-Shia lines or other reasons, then the possibility of Iran trying to activate the Fatemiyoun, the Shia militia, could be a very significant, at least local, challenge for the Taliban in the west part of the country.

Again, this is all down the road. I don't expect any of this to be materializing in 10 weeks, 12 weeks. More time would have to elapse before that. And frankly, how will the Taliban manage to maintain homogeneity and control will be the key issue for it, especially as the Taliban's been operating tens of thousands of fighters. But now there is victory. They have nothing to fight. So, they will be saying, okay, what did we get out of risking our lives for decades? What kind of payoffs will we get? How are we going to live in peace? What kind of access to land will we get? And so that can be stimulating both internal factions, tensions, frictions, as well as local ones.

DEWS: Vanda, as you start to wrap up this conversation, I'm going to look back one more time to 20 years ago, just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks that we know emanated from al-Qaida, then sheltered by the Taliban. President George W. Bush launched the attack on the Taliban regime in October of that year to eliminate that terrorist operation, to eliminate the regime that harbored them. Now the Taliban is back in control of Afghanistan. And I think, while a lot of Americans are rightfully heartbroken about the images that we've been seeing over this weekend, and then I'm sure we'll continue to see about the rights of women and girls, about the progress, that we spent a lot of our national treasure, our lives to achieve. Do you think that the Taliban controlled Afghanistan now is going to be a threat to the United States the way it was 20 years ago?

FELBAB-BROWN: I don't think that Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban is, in the foreseeable future, a threat like it was before 9/11 for many reasons. One reason is that al-Qaida is decimated. It's just a much weaker entity. Doesn't mean that there is zero al-Qaida members, but its capacity is nowhere to where it was 20 years ago.

The second important factor is that the United States, in addition to fighting 20 years of war in Afghanistan at the cost of one trillion dollars and two thousand four hundred more U.S. lives, also spent a tremendous amount of resources in its internal defenses. We go through airports with checks that we didn't experience 20 years ago; counterterrorism units and forces are present in other parts of the world; and U.S. regular law enforcement forces have counterterrorism units that just didn't exist ago.

So, the 20 years of efforts was not simply about defeating al-Qaida. It was crucial. It was not simply about state building in Afghanistan, but it was a dramatic investment and changes to our laws, to our economy, to our law enforcement procedures. A lot of dramatic changes. And clearly, the United States cannot be in a position anymore of invading every country where terrorists might operate from, where they might have a safe haven or organizational capacity. We are seeing significant terrorist threats in Mali with al-Qaida actors, very powerful ones, with ISIS actors, very powerful ones. We are seeing dramatic rise of terrorism in places like Niger and Nigeria you have powerful terrorist groups operating. In Somalia, obviously. They vary in their international focus. They vary in their capacity and interest in targeting international actors. Some of the ones in Mali are very focused on that. Actors in places like Libya, others like the actors in Nigeria, for example, are far more internally focused.

But the solution clearly cannot be that the United States invades all and adopts long term, decades-long state building missions in all places that are challenged by effective governance. We need to be helping those countries to build better governance structures, and that requires demanding greater accountability, engaging in far tougher love, cutting off resources to those countries if they receive, for example, assistance for security forces but do not spend it wisely. But much of the counterterrorism focus will need to be closer to home. It will involve

cooperating with other partners in Europe and Australia in the Pacific, sharing intelligence, perhaps enabling limited strikes. But it's not realistic in the current geopolitical space and in the domestic issues that the country is grappling with, that we will simply be taking on these decades long, open ended deployments with vast military forces in many parts of the world.

DEWS: Vanda, I think that's all the time we have for this incredibly important and timely discussion. I know there's lot more issues that we could talk about. So, I encourage listeners to follow you on Twitter and also visit our website, [brookings.edu](http://brookings.edu), to read what you've written about Afghanistan and also to read what our other Brookings scholars have written about it. So, Vanda, I want to again, thank you for sharing with us your time and expertise today. I really appreciate it.

FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much, Fred, for the opportunity. And I want to echo what you just said, that I am not the only Brookings voice on Afghanistan issues. One of the enormous delights and privileges of working at Brookings is to work in a place with no institutional position, where every scholar has the opportunity to, with evidence, document her or his views. And there is great diversity and great disagreement among us at Brookings on Afghanistan. And so, I very much encourage our listeners to look up at the work of other people: President John Allen, Michael O'Hanlon, Madiha Afzal, Bruce Riedel, other scholars. There is great value and riches to be learned from the disagreements and agreements.

DEWS: And it's all on [brookings.edu](http://brookings.edu). Vanda, thank you very much.

FELBAB-BROWN: My pleasure.

DEWS: A team of amazing colleagues helps make the Brookings Cafeteria possible. My thanks go out to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo; Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, who does the book interviews; my communications colleagues Marie Wilkin,

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.