

Losing a War in Afghanistan: Countering the Taliban and Understanding U.S. Policies

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A Conversation with Jessica Donati, Thomas Joscelyn, and Bill Roggio, moderated by Clifford D. May

MAY: A War in Afghanistan: Countering the Taliban and Understanding U.S. Policies. It's been almost two decades since President George Bush, after the attacks of 9/11, told Congress that the nation should expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen. Journalist Dexter Filkins has called this the "Forever War." At FDD, we've called it the "Long War." I'm pleased to have my colleagues from FDD's Long War Journal here to discuss this important and timely subject. Before we jump in just by way of housekeeping, I should note that today's event is being live streamed, but again, many thanks to those who've showed up in the snow to be with us, and for others who are tuning in remotely. I encourage you guys here online, to join in on today's conversation on Twitter, which is @FDD. I also encourage you to check out our newly redesigned website. We can now be found at fdd.org and there you can find FDD's latest analysis and subscribe to receive information on research projects and experts.

I'd also ask that you silence your cell phones, and with that I'm pleased to introduce our panelists today. Jessica Donati is a State Department reporter for the Wall Street Journal. She was previously the Kabul bureau chief and covered Afghanistan for the Wall Street Journal in 2013. Jessica arrived in Kabul at the end of the U.S.'s transfer of security to the Afghan government. She traveled both with and without military escort to report on the conflict.

Bill Roggio is a senior fellow at FDD, and editor of FDD's Long War Journal. Next to him is Tom Joscelyn, a senior fellow at FDD as well, and also senior editor of FDD's Long War Journal. Bill and Tom have been covering Afghanistan on a daily basis for more than a decade outlying their analysis in FDD's Long War Journal and elsewhere.

Let me start with this. Tom, in a recent article in The Weekly Standard, you had this sentence, "America has lost the war in Afghanistan." You added "Washington may not want to admit it, but U.S. military insist the conflict is a stalemate, but make no mistake, the original 9/11 war has been lost." I want to come back to that. I want to talk about that. That's our main topic today, but before I do, let me just ask you, just with my way of background in context just so people understand, can you kind of run us through the phases of this conflict, going back right to 9/11?

JOSCELYN: Sure. I mean, we're talking about the course of 17 years here. There's not been one strategy or three strategies. There have been, I don't know, half a dozen different strategies at different times. And, when I say we lost the original 9/11 war, remember the original U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan was to topple the Taliban and remove it from power and end its regime. Well, today as we sit here, the Taliban now contests or controls more territory than it has in any point in time since then. The Taliban has clearly not been defeated.

And so, there's no will or capacity at this point, within the West to defeat them, to actually fight them, so for all intents and purposes we have lost.

But, from that original period, right after 9/11 in October 2001, the U.S. organized the coalition to go in and topple the Taliban with a very light footprint. We went in and basically made a catastrophic mistake, we would argue, and this is probably one of the biggest mistakes of the 9/11 wars, was allowing sort of al Qaeda senior leadership and Taliban senior leadership to slither away, to get out. So, from the Tora Bora Mountains and from other areas, this allowed sort of key figures within the jihadi groups and organizations and Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan to reorganize themselves and eventually relaunch an insurgency in Afghanistan against us and our Afghan allies.

And so, basically, the Afghan war sort of muddled on for the first several years after that. At some point, I guess probably what would you say, Bill ... 2004 ... 2005 a spigot comes on and the insurgency starts ramping up, and they become big problems in Afghanistan. Of course by this point in time, the U.S. has opened up a second front in Iraq and didn't understand what it was doing there, in terms of opening up this second front against the Jihadis. Now, the American attention is divided and basically, we have two raging conflicts that we don't really understand either one of them, and so we don't really have a focus on Afghanistan that we should.

By the time that President Obama is inaugurated in January 2009, Afghanistan and as he accurately noted at the time, is in bad shape. The Taliban had significant momentum in its insurgency, and he argued for a sort of switch of resources or to focus on Afghanistan at the expense of Iraq. And so, what he did was he said we're going to basically focus on fighting in Afghanistan, but we're going to use this surge of forces for only 18 months, and then we're going to withdraw these forces and basically try and shift the power to the Afghan government. Envisioning we would have a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan before the end of his second term. Of course that failed because the situation deteriorated so rapidly that even President Obama wanted to get American forces out.

The Taliban had come raging back, and we were left in a situation now, where basically since the beginning of 2011, the American policy in has been to train and advise and support the Afghan government's security forces, and also carry out counter-terrorism missions, and perform some new operational raids as of last year against Taliban strongholds and facilities. But there's no real desire, will, or effort to actually defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan, and given the fact they now contest or control more territories since 2001, that's why I would say the war effort has been lost.

MAY: Bill, let me start this with you.

George W. Bush realizes that al Qaeda has been hosted by the Taliban, we've been attacked, the Taliban has not been cooperative in any way, it sort of makes sense for him to say, well we're going to go in there and teach them a lesson. And keep in mind also, that President Obama, when he got into office, what did he say? He said Afghanistan is "the right battle field." Afghanistan is the war that "has to be won." In what way did both of these presidents in your view, misunderstand the situation?

ROGGIO: I think that while they talked a good game about a war that needed to be won, we never operated in a way to fight a war to win it. I believe that insufficient resources and expertise — what we applied to the country was insufficient. We've never put proper military pressure on the Taliban. Look, I think the failure at the battle of Tora Bora, the desire to fight with a light footprint and Afghan forces — I know Tom mentioned this. I think it's probably the largest mistake we've made because we had a chance to deal a death blow to al Qaeda, and that could have allowed us to extricate ourselves from Afghanistan, and let the Afghans deal with their problems, as well as defeat al Qaeda's leadership, which by the way, they escaped and then they spread out throughout the globe, and now we have insurgencies not just in Afghanistan, but they picked up in Pakistan and Somalia and Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Mali — I could go on and on — Libya, where these insurgencies have spread and that's spread from the nucleus of the al Qaeda leaders that escaped from Tora Bora.

It's always said that we can't defeat the Taliban, and I disagree with that. I think that we just didn't — we weren't willing to do what it took to defeat the Taliban, and part of that was dealing with the Taliban's prime sponsor, which is Pakistan. We've never made an effort, although the Bush Administration threatened to nuke — or the story goes — that the Bush Administration threatened to nuke Pakistan.

JOSCELYN: Bomb them — threatened to bomb them.

ROGGIO: Yeah. Yeah, threatened to bomb them back to the Stone Age. You know, that never happened. Trump again, puts hard words on Pakistan in the lasted iteration. It never happens, and in allowing that safe haven for Taliban and their allies with al Qaeda and the host of the Jihadist groups that operate in Afghanistan, that safe haven has been crucial to this war. Not underestimating the popularity of the Taliban within Afghanistan, but if this was purely a problem within Afghanistan, I think this war would have been much easier to manage. The Pakistani safe havens and support, the hospitals, the training camps, the recruiting, everything that has come from that country, the U.S. has never dealt with it properly, and won't. I think that is a major reason why this war is being lost.

MAY: Jessica, I've visited Afghanistan 10 years ago this month, actually. A number of think tank people were invited, really to see what the military was doing. I remember one General saying if we do this right, we won't have to come back. I remember another General saying, "I'm here to build the first Afghan Air Force in history." What could be more fun than that? I found them, I have to say, very convincing that they knew what they were doing. This is the best military the world has ever seen. They say they can do this, they can do it. They need the resources. Were you persuaded during your visits there a few years later, that they knew what they were doing? That they had a theory of victory that was coherent?

DONATI: I think by the time I got there, the surge had come to an end, and it had become pretty obvious by then that the Afghan forces weren't ready to take over. And I think that a lot of it seemed to be — Obama seemed to be in a big hurry to leave the country because he had made a campaign pledge to end the war, and that was the focus, and so that was really — It seemed to be more a case of just creating a narrative that would have matched his subjective. And given the opportunity in 2014 to say we have transferred power over to the Afghan forces,

this is how wars end in the 20th Century, and our job is done. And that was very much the message that we were getting.

I think the message changed again when it became clear that this narrative didn't stand ground when the first major city fell. When Kunduz in 2015 that sort of unmasked this narrative and gradually it became a war again. And under Trump, that obviously is now the objective is again beating the Taliban back whereas we forget that in 2014, by the end of it, the Taliban weren't even the enemy. U.S. forces weren't allowed to strike the Taliban because they were considered to be part of the Afghan population, which was also true.

I think generally, the objective has changed year to year, administration to administration, and that's quickly clear when you're a journalist and you're going back to what was written in previous years.

MAY: Jessica, also when you were there, you were covering the military, but you were also covering the country. Did you have a sense, and it's not an easy thing to obviously get, of what Afghans wanted to see as the conclusion? Were they nostalgic for the period of Taliban rule? Were they hopeful that they would have a free and democratic country? Did you get a sense of that?

DONATI: I think the one thing that stood out during the 2014 election, I was in Kandahar, and I was wearing a burka and I was going around on foot because the roads were closed and we had no security, and you were just sort of blending in and you would ask people "What do you want? Who are you voting for, and why?" And people only ever said, "We just want peace. We just want to be left alone." And generally that was all they really cared about. I think it hurts me to say this because I've got many friends who are a part of the so called Afghan elite, educated, traveled abroad, and obviously they share values that are a lot closer to those that we see in the West. But I think the average Afghan really just wants to be able to live a life without being in fear of being killed, for their children to have a future, enough to eat. I think that's probably all the average Afghan wants.

MAY: And one more question for you before I go back to Tom. If that's what they wanted, do you, having reported on it, see a path that achieves that goal?

DONATI: I think it's really difficult to make predictions about the future.

MAY: Especially about the future.

DONATI: The main focus really at the moment, both in Afghanistan and in D.C. is peace, and how can we negotiate a deal. I think at this point people are ready to give up anything just to end the bloodshed. I don't even know whether that's possible at this stage because both sides are so fragmented for different reasons, and you can go back in history to ask yourself why the Taliban is divided, why the government is divided, but is it possible to reach a situation where the fighting just stops? I think that's a difficult question to answer at this stage.

MAY: Or any stage. Tom, during his farewell speech in early September, General John W. Nicholson Jr., who was been the commander in Afghanistan during the Trump period. He oversaw the effort of Trump. He said it's time for this war in Afghanistan to end. I thought that generals and the soldiers understand that wars are not ended. Wars are won, or wars are lost. So I was kind of surprised to hear him make a statement like that. Were you?

JOSCELYN: No. I wasn't surprised because this is the rhetoric that we've been hearing for a long time, and it shows the cognitive dissonance, really, in all of this. It's fine and dandy to say people want to stop fighting, and they want the war to be over, but the enemy gets vote. And you can say the war needs to come to an end, but the two of us read the Taliban every day of our lives and what they're saying is that the Islamic Eremite of Afghanistan is rising once again. I'll make a prediction about the future. They're not going to be satiated with just a few provinces in Afghanistan as we leave. They may delay. They may blow out some decent interval, so to speak, for us to get out, but they envision themselves as the only legitimate rulers of Afghanistan, and they say this over and over again. That's what they're fighting for. And the cognitive dissonance starts from the fact that basically you have the West, and understandably a lot of Afghans who just want the war to end, but that formulation doesn't take into account what the other side really wants.

One of the things we saw earlier this year — there was this temporary three day ceasefire that the Taliban decided to enact and there was a lot of hope that this would lead to the end of the fighting. Of course, it didn't. We said it wouldn't, and it didn't. Of course they use this as a propaganda stunt for their own side. The only thing the temporary ceasefire showed however, it unmasked a false assumption that's been held throughout much of the West and Western analysis, which is that the Taliban doesn't maintain a cohesive command and control of the insurgency throughout the country. Well guess what, that three day ceasefire just proved that conclusively because they stood down for three days across the country because they were given orders to, the fighters did.

This is an enemy taking into account what their hierarchy — what their senior leadership says is very, very important, and what they're saying is the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is on its way back.

ROGGIO: Can I make a quick?

MAY: You can, sure.

ROGGIO: When you talk about peace, people say, well I just want peace. Well, you may get that, and be careful what you wish for. It's going to be the peace of the Taliban, and that is not, I think as history shows, and even what we see in areas that are controlled by the Taliban or contested by the Taliban, it's not very peaceful. This is why I think we really need to seriously reconsider negotiating with the Taliban and what we think is going to happen. If the goal is for U.S. forces to withdraw, they're going to leave the Afghan people in a misery, and we're going be responsible for this.

MAY: One more quote by General Nicholson, he claimed the Taliban is fighting "to increase their leverage in negotiation."

ROGGIO: Yeah.

MAY: And to maintain their cohesion, he encouraged those who are looking at this situation on the ground to, "Expand the aperture, and look at the progress towards reconciliation." What does he mean, and is that at all correct?

ROGGIO: They've made a lot of statements like this. Let me just start by saying our military leadership in the United States has failed us. They've failed us in Afghanistan and elsewhere, but it's nowhere more apparent than it is in Afghanistan. They've also made statements like, "The Taliban doesn't have the initiative." "The Taliban isn't on the offensive." Does anyone in this room believe that? I mean, if you were watching the news from Afghanistan, they are daily taking the fight to Afghan forces. They're killing Afghan forces, not while on patrol, not while Afghan forces are on offensive operations, but while they're hunkered down on their bases.

Yeah, I think there's a — I don't know what they're smoking up there is resolute support in U.S. Forces Afghanistan command —

JOSCELYN: It's pretty strong, whatever it is.

ROGGIO: Yeah, it certainly is giving them a lot of delusions. They're using Taliban statements for the Taliban from 2018 of February this year to claim that the Taliban want peace. That they're laying out their negotiating position. The Taliban are saying, we won't talk to the Afghan government, release our prisoners, get out of the country, then we'll talk about peace. And that is the Taliban peace that I'm talking about.

MAY: In Iraq, we were doing very badly and then two things happened. One is a surge, which people use as a short hand for — and we did have in addition, more troops surging in, but you also had a counter insurgency plan, which was based on the philosophy that you have to shape the environment, clear the environment, hold the environment, build the environment. Did we not take that doctrine of how to counter insurgency, and move it into Afghanistan and try to make it work there as it essentially did work in Iraq?

JOSCELYN: Well, they did it for 18 months, and then the plug was pulled on that. This gets to the whole schizophrenic American policy, where everybody goes all in on coin for a period of time, and then says okay after 18 months we're not going to do coin anymore. Now, coin is a dirty word. We're old enough to remember when it wasn't a dirty word, right?

MAY: I know it was —

JOSCELYN: It was only several years ago. Now, I'm not saying that's the right answer now. At this point, I don't think there's any political or military will for that, but the point is you're talking about shaping the environment. So here's a very simple fact: The Afghan people

have been brutalized for decades now. This is an absolute travesty in many ways, and they talk about wanting peace and wanting the war to end, but every UN report that comes out, every piece of data that comes out shows that the number one cause of civilian casualties in Afghanistan is the Taliban led insurgency. They are the principle killers of civilians, no matter what their rhetoric is about, trying to protect civilians. Every piece of UN data they put, every UN report they've given out. The Taliban flies into a fury over this. They hate that this is pointed out. But that's the point, is that they are the ones who have decided to keep the fight alive, and we're pretending like that's not the case, like they can decide to lay down arms and that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan doesn't mean all that much to them.

ROGGIO: I'm going to make one more quick point about failure in military leadership. Seeing no better than with General Petraeus, Obama decimates the counter insurgency strategy, and what does General Petraeus do? Does he resign from the military? Does he protest? No, he takes directorship of CIA. So his career was far more important than U.S. strategy in Afghanistan or objecting to what he knew to be failed U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, and that in a nutshell is fad. We've seen this from just about every General. If they didn't retire, they failed upwards, and they got a higher command in the U.S. military.

JOSCELYN: A cushy consulting job.

ROGGIO: Yeah. Presidents don't fire Generals anymore. They're untouchable, and this is part of the reason why we're losing the war in Afghanistan, or lost the war in Afghanistan.

MAY: Jessica, I had dinner with a retired General who served in Afghanistan about a week ago, and I made these arguments politely and gently and he disagreed with me. One of the things he said is, you have to look at the population in Afghanistan, and what's happened there. People have moved from the country into the cities. About half the population is now in the urban areas. The urban areas are under government control. Taliban, they've got the rural areas, but so what? That's not going to be so consequential. What do you think about that?

DONATI: It is true that there has been a migration of Afghan people towards the cities, but the majority of the population live outside of Kabul and maybe Mazari Sharif, where this might be true and the fact is that the Taliban and the Afghan government in a lot of places, work together. One of the things that we found, and that other reporters continued to cover, is that a lot of the time you see that government services have been administered by the Taliban, and so the Taliban will have a role in choosing who teaches at schools, how clinics are set up, who runs them.

I mean, to talk about the Taliban as a unit, sort of a force that where military force that the U.S. is fighting against and the government is fighting against, kind of loses sight of the fact that most Afghan families are split now between the Taliban and the government. They've hedged their bets. Everybody pretty much has a cousin or a brother or somebody fighting in the Taliban because there's not a lot else to do. There's not a lot of business. If you're not involved in the war one way or another, you don't really have any way to make a living, in the long term. I think it's difficult to assume the simple counter insurgency or if we had done something militarily better would have changed the outcome. I think it needs to be looked at not so much a

war of one side against the other, but as a civil war now. It has to be looked at in that sense and how can you broker an agreement between the same people who have — If you meet Taliban, they're exactly the same as meeting Afghan because mostly, they are Afghan.

MAY: We talk about the war in Afghanistan and we refer to the war in Iraq, and of course there is a civil war taking place or a war taking place in Syria. It's a multinational war in a way. There's a war taking place in Yemen. Are we making a mistake to see these as separate discrete wars? Is it not possible to say, no let's connect all these dots here. This is one war we're fighting on multiple battlefields — but that's what it is.

DONATI: I think that's been partly the problem. And one of the things that blew my mind when I got to Afghanistan, was that you saw a lot of the military solutions that were applied in Iraq had also been applied in Afghanistan, as though it were the same place. Which doesn't make any sense because culturally they are very different — different languages, different histories, and so applying a one size fits all to all the wars is itself problematic. I think the U.S. does look at it as one great war against an abstract concept of terrorism, when the reality on the ground in all these different places is different and complex and local.

JOSCELYN: Well, I have a curve ball to that. One of the things we talk about a lot in terms of the analytical side of defining the enemy, is what I call — I've coined a phrase. The prevailing paradigm in counter terrorism circles is what I call the "disconnect the dots" sort of approach, which is, a group can pop up somewhere in West Africa or originally Somalia, which, as we pointed out, are other groups, and the immediate sort of impulse is to say, well it's not really part of al Qaeda. They're saying that they're al Qaeda, al Qaeda is recognizing them as al Qaeda, they have all sort of al Qaeda veterans in their leadership, their propaganda is littered with al Qaeda sort of statements, they're adopting al Qaeda's whole strategy for waging Jihad and everything else. And of course a big part of that is to inculcate themselves within the local population. That has been al Qaeda's strategy for many years now.

When you talked about a broader conflict, right now, just so you understand, al Qaeda has branches everywhere from West Africa to South Asia, and they all genuflect, regularly, to Ayman al Zawahiri, the head of al Qaeda. And who does Ayman al Zawahiri have his by hours oath of allegiance to? The head of the Taliban. And the reason for that is that al Qaeda's been telling their legion of followers around the globe, in all these different battlefields, that the resurrection of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan is the nucleus and our new caliphate. Right now, I don't think that they have the juice to have their own real caliphate. I think that's a very far off fantasy at this point to have their own functioning caliphate. But these ideas matter as we saw with ISIS and what they were saying about the caliphate and resurrecting a caliphate, and these ideas matter their followers. They believe this and you can imagine what the impact of a victory in Afghanistan, which is coming for this cause will be.

Al Qaeda had already told its followers very early on in the Trump administration, that the America First policy means America loses in Afghanistan. This is the end of them as a superpower. Just as the Soviets were defeated here as a superpower, the Americans have been defeated here as a superpower. And I think that that messaging has consequences. These ideas have consequences and it's like a having a shot in the arm to the global jihadist movement. Once

again, I think is coming. You know, now will it be exactly like the rise of ISIS? Probably not, perhaps not, but you'll see ramifications immediately in Afghanistan, you'll see ramifications in Pakistan of course, where you have the Jihadis are divided between those who wage war against the Pakistani state and those who were sponsored by the Pakistani state.

But the Pakistani people have suffered a great deal at the hands of the jihadis. And now this jihadist menace is rising once again in South Asia. I think the consequences have been because the prevailing paradigm in counter terrorism circles is what I call, disconnects the dots. I think the international ramifications of this have probably been underestimated. So I would say.

MAY: Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of al-Qaeda, is he probably in Pakistan now?

JOSCELYN: Probably either Pakistan or Afghanistan. The reason why it's tricky is we have good reasons to believe that as-Sahab, al-Qaeda's main propaganda arm has relocated a good portion of its services back into Afghanistan. And there've been a number of senior al-Qaeda commanders who we know have been operating in Afghanistan once again over the last years, and we haven't even gotten to one of the bigger arguments we had, Bill and I had with the US military on this. Just to give you a talking point on Al Qaeda and how these memes sort of grabbed the attention of officials and it doesn't matter how much data you throw at them, they keep repeating the same talking point for years, for six years about the US, the CIA and the US military told us that there were only 50 to 100 Al Qaeda guys in Afghanistan at any given time.

And then the US military or NATO would say hey we just killed 49 guys and Kunar. And they'd say, well then that means just means distract, you know, does that mean that there's 50 minus 49 or 100 minus 49, you know? And they say nope, still 50 to 100. Well you just killed 27 in Kandahar, up still 50 to 100, you just killed 100 in Helmand up, still 50 to 100. It didn't matter how many times they went through this exercise, they couldn't get off this. You know, and I think that this is a big part of the problem here, is there's been an absolute failure to really conceptualize who the enemy is, how we're fighting them, why we're fighting them and what that means. And it's, it's just been a –

MAY: Quick question. The US had an effort that was successful in the end to kill Osama bin Laden. Have we in this administration or the past administration said, "We should kill Ayman al-Zawahiri here as well?" Are we trying to do that?

JOSCELYN: I think there were efforts to get him, but I mean, you know, this is one of the ways that Al Qaeda has been underestimated, right? This guy, Ayman al-Zawahiri has been wanted by various governments since the 1980s, but I couldn't hide for decades from all these different foreign governments who are hunting me around the world. And he's still alive in 2018, you know, and in fact al-Qaeda just released something which was very interesting and nobody noticed. Al-Qaeda just released the translation of Ayman al-Zawahiri's encouragement to the 9/11 hijackers. If you remember after 9/11, there was a one in one of the wreckage of one of the planes, there was found this note that was carried by one of the hijackers on which is this, this is what it takes to prepare yourself to be a martyr for the cause and here's how you maintain focus of your will and how you maintain focus on the mission.

And al-Qaeda just released the fact that that actually was written by Ayman Al-Zawahiri himself and published a translation of it. That guy is still alive. And not only is he still alive, but despite all the problems al-Qaeda is facing, this rivalry with ISIS which are many, many problems, Right? And that the defections. He still has commanders in multiple theaters who are openly loyal to him and genuflect to him. And again, he has his bay'ah, his oath of allegiance, to get inside of the head of the Taliban. And I think that says a lot about how kind al-Qaeda views this.

ROGGIO: I want to make a real point on the 50 to 100. Not all house of cards collapsed when there was a raid in 2015 and October 2015 in Kandahar province. Al-Qaeda ran a training camp in Shorabak district.

JOSCELYN: Two of them, yeah.

ROGGIO: One of them was the US —

JOSCELYN: 30 square miles in size. Probably the largest Al Qaeda training —

ROGGIO: The largest training camp since 9/11 that they witnessed from Al Qaeda. 200 al Qaeda fighters were estimated — anywhere from 150 to 200 were killed during the operation. Then the US military had to turn around and say, "We're revising our estimates up to 100 to 300." I mean that's the insanity that we were dealing with in this war and we're sitting here saying, "maybe that number is wrong too." How do you know that that's the number? You got the number wrong the last time.

This is what we deal with reporting on this war in Afghanistan constantly. It's quite frustrating to get past these ideas that are put out there and that perpetuate throughout the intelligence community, throughout the military, throughout governments. But when you try to cut through all this, what you see as rotten failure.

DONATI: Can I say something?

MAY: Go ahead.

DONATI: I would question whether, I mean, I think that the discussion about al-Qaeda or Islamic state, I mean it's fair to be concerned about them finding safe haven in Afghanistan, but I do think it's a bit of a distraction when it comes to the war in Afghanistan because if you look at what the Taliban specifically want, their main demand is for US forces to leave. They haven't made any specific commitment either way to whether they, they've never said, "Well, we want al-Qaeda to be here." They have no intention, they have never expressed an intent to attack the US or anybody outside of their own borders.

And if you're looking at al-Qaeda, which is a global network, just fighting al Qaeda are huge expense both financially and in terms of human life. In one small corner where they operate, seems to me a like a strategy that's incomplete and if you want to look at al-Qaeda, it might make sense also to look broadly at their sources of funding and the many, many areas in

the world where ungoverned spaces, for example, this hell or parts of in the Pacific. I mean there's a whole place where they can, where they can operate, Somalia, so focusing on al-Qaeda and their claims this or that to the Taliban I think is a bit of a distraction.

MAY: Go ahead, mix it up.

JOSCELYN: A couple of quick rebuttal points that, I mean I don't know what this leads to in terms of policy or you know, war fighting, but we try and adhere to the facts of what, what these organizations say. In December 2016, the Taliban actually released a video through Mamba'al-Jihad, which was the former Haqqani network propaganda arm which is fully integrated in the Taliban, called bond of the nation with the Mujahideen and the video which was released by the Taliban on its websites and multiple languages was a very in your face celebration of the alliance between the Taliban and al Qaeda, putting Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden side by side and having al Qaeda figures and ideologues in Yemen and elsewhere. You know, talking in the video and celebrating this fact of this. Now this is something that the Taliban is very happy to try and keep on the down low most of the time because they know this causes problems for them that this is advertised.

But there have been many pieces of evidence that you can show through the course of history that this is in fact an ongoing strong relationship. In fact, the UN in August, actually late July, published report released in August, said that the two remain close allies, this is the official UN report, the alliance remains intact and al-Qaeda still gains benefits, right? One of the reasons for this is that al-Qaeda has embedded trainers throughout the Taliban insurgency training Taliban fighters as part of this. In fact, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, which has oath of allegiance to al-Zawahiri and through Zawahiri was stood up principally to help the Taliban resurrect Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and their code of conduct is very clear that this is their main sort of mission in the region.

I don't know what this leads to in terms of necessarily policy recommendations or war fighting, but there's a whole facts that and I can filibuster, if you want it. Whole facts that's showing that in fact, the two remain very much in the same trench to this day.

ROGGIO: I would also argue al Qaeda doesn't operate at a training camp and in Kandahar province.

JOSCELYN: Nicholson even admitted that it was hosted by the Taliban.

ROGGIO: Without the Taliban support. So if you, if part of your goal is to keep al Qaeda from establishing a safe haven in Afghanistan, the Taliban is part of the problem and don't think that's going to go away just because US troops withdraw.

MAY: But very broadly, the options available to us. How many are there, what are there? The options for the US at this point, and I'm not saying what are the Pentagon, but that's a separate question which I'm going to ask what the Pentagon, what Pompeo had stayed what president Trump, what they would entertain and seriously do. But if you had totally blue sky, how many options are there? I mean, one option is to leave. One option is to stay and put in

whatever forces are necessary. One option is to say, "Well, we're just going to, you know, uh, contain the Taliban as much as we can where it is and we're going to keep the cities and we're going to leave into the countries and the countryside." But I'm trying to figure what are the actual options that one would look at as a planner?

ROGGIO: Yeah, I mean look, obviously the blue sky option would be, and I don't think this is possible because I think this time has long passed for us to really effect to have a winning strategy. Because I don't believe the Afghan people in general support us any longer. We failed for too long, but that would be, you know, you're going to double down and do a surge, get the right people in there, try and rebuild the society. Obviously that would require putting pressure on, and I'm not talking just talking tough to Pakistan, but putting real pressure on Pakistan to end their support for the insurgency. And then we have to counter insurgents and do all those things. Whether that can work or not, I don't know, but that certainly would be the blue sky option.

On the other end, There is a complete US withdrawal, as you said, negotiate some type of acceptable peace agreement with the Taliban, which would really be cover for withdraw. If something like that was done, I would suggest trying to take out as many targets within Afghanistan and Pakistan, high level leaders and hit Taliban's military and I realize that probably wouldn't affect much, but that's something that could be done. US could continue operating as it is and this sort of slow, allow this slow burn situation.

The current strategy of seeding the rural areas to the Taliban has failed, because the Taliban, these are important areas is where they tax, they recruit, run training camps and then they stage their attacks on more populous areas. So people discount the importance of the rural areas. But I mean if you just read Mao and you know, and that's all you need to know.

It's a very, very thin little book and most of it is repetitive, but he tells you exactly how to wage war and insurgence this is exactly what the Taliban have been doing, so you know, and I guess another option would be, you know, a lot of times what I see in the Taliban propaganda when they issuing information on overtaking bases and they'll sit around and loiter around these basis for hours, for instance, they'll overrun a base in the middle of the night and then it's like midday and the Taliban are still milling around on the bases. There's no effort to try and hit them, hit them and make them pay the price militarily, they'll roll out in convoys.

Again, I obviously view the situation to be very bleak, but there are certainly options that we could do. I think you could make the Taliban pay a bigger price militarily for attacking Afghan forces and that's something that should be considered. But I just don't see any good options at this point in time. Again, any peace with the Taliban will be the Taliban's peace and it'll be something that we're not going to want to witness.

MAY: I'm going to ask a few more questions, but within the next five minutes I'm going to go to you, so think you for your questions and then you'll show your hand and we'll get a microphone to you. If Mattis or Pompeo were, they come to you and say, "Look, off the record, you spent time there. What do you think we should do at this point?" What would you tell?

DONATI: I get asked this question a lot because as journalists we're always criticizing what people are doing and it's obviously very easy to criticize, especially when people end up with, they start with a problem that may be intractable. I think that there needs to be a much bigger focus on really ending the bloodshed. The New York Times had a story today that the president admitted that 28000 police and army were killed since 2015. It's a staggering number and that doesn't even include the number of civilians.

That doesn't include the exponential number of people who are maimed and there's a sense in the US that because they're Afghan lives, they don't matter, and that we can expend 10, 15 American special forces a year and that's fine because they signed up for that, which is also a problematic assumption in itself. I think the focus needs to shift. And also the problem with the way the US administration is set up. You can't have a coherent policy for a long time. It's only as long as a single administration.

While Trump has made a commitment an open ended commitment, first of all, he can't commit beyond his presidency. And second of all, nobody really believes he's committed to staying for the full time of his presidency. And everyone's expecting him to wake up one morning and see Fox News and say, "Oh my God, we're still there." and put everybody out.

MAY: So General Mattis says to you, "Okay, I think you're right, Jessica. We should end the bloodshed. But how do we end the bloodshed? Do we just leave? Is that the best way to end the bloodshed?"

DONATI: I think that leaving could potentially, I mean leaving rapidly would cause the country to collapse. I think that the emphasis now on peace at any cost. I think it's interesting. I don't know whether it's, whether it will succeed, but I think the reality is, is that the Afghan government can't survive without US backing and the Taliban probably wouldn't survive as well as they do without that backing from Pakistan and other factions. There needs to be a sense of realism that this isn't, that everybody has a role in the war and to say this is an Afghan only solution there needs to be ownership. And I think the US is finally taking ownership, which is a good step. Where it will go, I mean we have to see, but there needs to be more discourse as well. It's never talked about. You only have to look at the Pentagon press briefings to see how many people are there. It's never the headlines anymore. It's the forgotten war as well as a forever war.

MAY: But I'm going to press you a little bit, because if you want to end the bloodshed, and that's good to say, but you're saying yes at the US simply leaves, there'll be bloodshed because the Afghan government will fall, that would happen, but that would incur bloodshed for sure. Saying, well, we have to leave but not quite so fast, which is sort of what we're doing. I'm not sure I'm understanding the option that is the least bad option in your view or anybody's view.

DONATI: I think now they focus more on negotiating peace and last on putting the Taliban on the back foot. I think that makes sense. And I think that's what they're doing now. I think at this point it's such a quagmire that it's very difficult to say, well, this is how we turn it off. But I think to make any kind of argument that you can, if only you in it a little bit longer, we can beat the Taliban and get ourselves into a better negotiating position. I think they've left that behind now, and I think that's a good thing.

MAY: All right, I'm going to go to your question. So let me know when you, when you have one. Very good. Let's bring the microphone around here and if you'll identify yourself and ask you a question. We've got very tough interns here. It's not like the White House. So be careful of the mic.

POWELL: Hi, I'm Bill Powell. I'm the chief Washington correspondent for Newsweek. Tom and Bill, I think the bottom line of US policy in Afghanistan since September 11, 2001, through the various iterations of Bush, Obama, now Trump has actually been pretty simple. It's to make damn well sure that September 11th, 2001 was not repeated. That there was not an attack on the United States of that scale and magnitude. Are we at risk now? Of replicating the conditions for another attack like that or not? Because if we are not, in the era of Donald Trump, hell in the era of Barack Obama, why do we care about all this stuff? Why do we care about all the rest of it? There has not been an attack like September 11th, since September 11th.

JOSCELYN: Well, I mean, it's a good question. I mean, I think, I think if you actually listen to what Bill and I say, you can see a lot of arguments cut both ways, you know, on, on all this stuff when it comes to the warfare Afghanistan. I'll say this, you know, just days before, this is what Jessica was saying about the lack of coverage of this, just days before the 2016 election. The US hunted down a guy named Farouq al-Katani in Kunar. And the intelligence I've talked to many intelligence officials about this, was that from that remote part of Afghanistan, he was in fact in charge of overseeing the plots against CONUS, against the continental United States from Afghanistan. And here's the other mission that Farouq al-Katani was responsible for, which was supporting the Taliban's insurgency in Eastern Afghanistan and in fact procuring funds, arms and everything else for the Taliban men they were fighting alongside al-Qaeda.

The bottom line is if we go back through Farouq al-Katani's portfolio, which is dossier, which is quite rich, one of the reasons why we argued for the Bin Laden files to be released, then got them released, although that's a whole, they went to a whole separate quagmire on that we can get into some other the time. But it was because it shows the complexity of what al-Qaeda was actually doing in Afghanistan at the time of immediate months before Bin Laden's death. For example, he had ordered Farouq al-Katani to make sure there were safe havens in Afghanistan for many al-Qaeda leaders once again, because they wanted to get out of the kill box in Northern Pakistan. This means that there is an ongoing threat from the region. There's also an ongoing ISIS threat from the region. By the way.

The third, we just went through the ISIS data as long as they say. And the third most active, so called area or province for the Islamic State is sort of this area that includes Afghanistan and Pakistan, and you can see what the Europeans have said and what the UN has said, where they've actually detected a hand from ISIS guys in this region, in plots in the West.

Now, the big question is what do you do about all that? Right? And how you solve all that? I'm not going to pretend like I have the answers. I think I wrote that this war is lost, right? So I don't think, you know, I don't think I'm going to have a silver bullet for all this, but I think our point, my point anyway is let's not sugarcoat some of this stuff here about the Taliban and, and its allies and what it's really all about.

And the fact of the matter is you can point to a lot of examples of Farouq al-Katanis who were wearing dual hats. I'll just say one more quick thing because this is a complex question you asked, right? I actually do care about the Afghan people. I know that's not, that's not fashionable, you know, really anymore. I get it. I don't want to document these people going under an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and what that means for women's rights, children's rights for the men who have opposed them, through the brief takeover Kunduz in 2015. They went right after all the women who had opposed them in that city. You know, I personally as a policy maker would hate to own that.

I would hate to make the decision that says, "I'm going to sacrifice even more lives." So yes, the bloodshed is terrible right now. Absolutely. I would love to find a silver bullet to end it, but two things. One, the Taliban is the principal actor that's causing the bloodshed. Okay. That's the number one thing. And number two, life under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is not going to be so pretty for the Afghans.

ROGGIO: I'll add one quick thing to that, look I guess the fundamental question here is, do you think safe havens for jihadist groups matter that want to attack us? I believe they do. I believe given the opportunity to have this safe haven, establish training camps that they are definitely creative. Have they shown in multiple attacks, successful attacks?

JOSCELYN: Of course they have multiple safe havens now.

ROGGIO: Yes, exactly. And I do think it matters. Given the opportunity, they will figure out a way to hit us, will it be on the scale of 9/11? I don't know, but I don't want to find out either.

MAY: Jessica you want to weigh on this?

DONATI: I think that the threat to the US homeland has changed a lot since 2001. If you look at the terrorists or terrorist inspired attacks in the US, they're mostly homegrown or by people from extreme groups who are American. And so I think that fighting the threat to the US in Afghanistan where the vast majority of people have no desire to attack the US and even the ones that are fighting us in Afghanistan just want to have the right to self-determination. I don't think it's necessarily practical.

MAY: Well, let's just, let's just dig in a little bit on this. So let's suppose that the orders were to be very frank and say, look, we're going to get Afghanistan, we're going to leave it to the Taliban. They're going to win, we're going to tell them if we know that if we know al Qaeda is planning attacks against us we will punish you, we can do that from outside. But other than that we don't care. And so we'll go back to a Taliban. We know what it's like. A Taliban ruled Afghanistan we'll have infidels or heretics or apostates having their limbs cut off in stadiums. Will have women not getting an education, we'll have. But that's ... Would your feeling be, well that's the way they want to run their country.

DONATI: First what I would say two things. One, there is no evidence to suggest that that's how the Taliban will set themselves up now.

MAY: Why would they be different?

DONATI: Well, I mean they've evolved a lot. There are plenty of Taliban areas where Taliban themselves send their girls to school, obviously it's not the kind of place where I would particularly want to be born. But it isn't that case now. And also the Taliban isn't the only faction now, if the US leaves you have a very powerful Northern Alliance groups, you have all sorts of different interests that would come together and the Taliban would be forced to share power. They'll probably share a much larger chunk of power than the US would like to see. But to think that they would just sweep over everything and end up on top and establish this brutal rule of 20 years ago. I don't think it's realistic.

Some factions of the Taliban for sure, but the Taliban is in some cases more moderate and I think the average Afghan doesn't particularly buy into the US concern for women's rights and this and that because they only have to look as far as Saudi Arabia to see how the Saudis treat their women who only recently been given permission to drive. Whose mothers need permissions from their sons just to leave the country? And they say, well, why is it one rule for our women and one rule for their women? And so I think you're not talking to them on the same level. So, yeah, two purposes, what were the Taliban rule actually look like shared with the other stakeholders?

MAY: your view is that the Taliban would share with other stakeholders rather than fight with other stakeholders.

DONATI: I mean, that's the point of a peace negotiation. I think if you were to broker, if you were to negotiate peace, it wouldn't necessarily be with the Taliban and Ghani's government, which perhaps doesn't have a huge constituency aside from the US. But they are powerful Afghan families. This is extremely powerful. Northern Alliance. You have Hazaras, you have the Tajiks, they're not just going to give up Afghanistan without a fight and that's the point of it.

MAY: Without a fight is different than saying, "They will — down and share power."

DONATI: Indeed, that's the point of a negotiation is that you negotiate to share power between the Taliban and all these various groups and that's the point of a peace negotiation. And that's really the question. And so I think that to sort of say, "Well if we leave, the Taliban will come back and if we, and then boohoo." That's just over oversimplifying I think. Probably the great question is, can you work out a peace agreement between these groups that have such different outlooks on the world? There's another question.

MAY: The US envoy to Afghanistan, special envoy is Zalmay Khalilzad. Does he see it the way you do or does it see he see it differently from what you do?

DONATI: I mean, I don't know how he sees it, but I know that in discussions that he's had with stake holders as we wrote in a story this week that created a bit of a stir in Afghanistan and it was the fact that, that his team is waiting to put aside in favor of negotiating peace, for various practical reasons. And I'm sure that he believes that there is a way to work out a deal that includes the Taliban but doesn't hand over the country to the Taliban. I think that's what he's

trying to achieve and having an election which is western-styled and likely to end in the same contention that all previous elections have, not just 2014 but also 2009 where no winner emerged, you would end up with no Afghan government at the end of it, no clear winner, and then who do you negotiate with the Taliban with? I mean, if he didn't believe that peace was possible, why would he have taken the job?

MAY: You want to get a word in, or —

JOSCELYN: Just one real quick point. I mean I think we have very significant reporting from the UN state department, Afghan sources, plenty of official reporting on what Sharia-style rule looks like under the areas that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan currently rules over.

They are the principle challenge to authority, the biggest game in town right now. In any post-American environment, Afghanistan, they will have the biggest share of Afghanistan.

You don't have to say it's going to be everything in Afghanistan, but it will be much of the country because right now, they contest their control according to the minimal estimates of the military, 45% according to our estimates, they contest their control over 60%.

They are clearly the largest game in town and we have very good reporting on what they've done to schools that they disapprove of including bombing attacks in the UN reports.

What they've done to, very telling by the way, religious Imams who don't support their agenda, very totalitarian slayings, and targeted assassinations. This is all going into the civilian casualty reports that the UN puts out very regularly.

Throughout all this, the Taliban has run what's known as their shadow government. They have shadow governors throughout the country who are building up, getting ready for rule. I don't think that will look very moderate, indeed.

ROGGIO: Right now in Afghanistan, right now, the Taliban are attacking two districts in Ghazni Province, Malistan and Jaghori, these are hazar districts. What is the Taliban doing right now?

They're hunting down everyone who has opposed them and killing them. They don't want to share power with the hazar in these districts or anywhere else.

This is time and time again I see this. The Taliban do not want to share power, they publicly stated so multiple times. Read their statement from the Moscow conference. They're issuing a set of demands.

Look, it could be their words. Everyone says, "Well, this is just what the Taliban says." Watch what they do on a daily basis on the ground in Afghanistan. Their words match their deeds. I know what Afghanistan is going to look like when the US withdraw.

JOSCELYN: They were supposed to be soft on the Shiite minorities, by the way, in Afghanistan. We're seeing day to day evidence that that's not the case right now.

RINKMAN: Hi, I'm Deb Rinkman, I'm with the Associated Press. Is it working? Okay, I have three different topics I want you all to address. I don't care who does it.

One, do you think that Ghani is losing a little bit of credibility with the U.S. administration at this point? He was kind of like a golden boy as he's always come through the US and sort of demonstrated all his western ways. But has he sort of lost a little bit of credibility with the administration?

Secondly, in terms of the peace talks, we've seen a lot of Taliban guys being released. There's no cease fire. They're continuing to fight. Is there any concession that we've seen from the Taliban yet in terms of the peace talks? Or are we just kind of giving in everything up front here.

Thirdly, is Trump listening to Erik Prince at all?

ROGGIO: I'll — Ghani, yeah I think he's definitely losing favor with the U.S. and this is a result of the U.S. negotiating with the Taliban without bringing in the Afghan government.

Without a doubt, they're starting to protest. Think about what's happening here. The Taliban has said for years, the Afghan government is a stooge, a puppet, un-Islamic. They're doing the west's bidding.

And what is the U.S. doing? Undercutting the Afghan government, again, by the way. This happened with peace negotiations under the Obama administration and that's why Karzai fell out with the U.S. and the collapsed peace talks.

The answer to that question is —

JOSCELYN: One of the reasons for Karzai.

ROGGIO: Yeah, sure. What was the second question again? I'm sorry. Yes, the answer to that is yes.

We're just giving up concessions again. This happened when we released the Taliban five and allowed the Taliban to open a political office. Again, they're making demands and we're doing our best.

We're not asking anything of the Taliban. We're not asking them to break ties with al-Qaeda. We're not asking any basic things that we should be asking.

I'm sorry.

RINKMAN: Is that a good strategy?

ROGGIO: I think all we're signaling to the Taliban is we're desperate.

DONATI: I agree that we, U.S., are signaling to the Taliban that we are desperate. I think the U.S. is desperate for sedition before Trump pulls the plug which I think a lot of people expect him to do.

But I think the Taliban, some of the more moderate factions, are willing to discuss a phase withdrawal of U.S. forces whereby certain landmarks are reached and a certain number of forces are withdrawn and it's not just pull everyone out, point blank.

I think that's probably a concession if you compare to more guideline positions to say all troops must leave for there to be any kind of discussion.

I think Ghani lost a lot of credibility, not just over this peace negotiation but his failure to fight corruption and the perception that he was engaging in corruption if not directly, people close to him are making a lot of money in setting up much the same kind of network that existed under Karzai.

I think that was clear to western diplomats working in Kabul, which I found out right up until I was there last year, people were tracking huge contracts and instances, which never really made the press because it was very difficult to verify in that public way.

But I know that there were a lot of cables being written back home that were ignored and I think that they really, that Ghani has lost the ear of the international community which is probably why he's in this situation now where they're not that bothered about including him in this peace process.

JOSCELYN: Just one quick point. You're asking about concessions and everything. It's very interesting. Originally, the U.S. government had pre-conditions for talks with the Taliban.

These were dropped in early 2011 and to my knowledge, we have not reinstated any because of course, we are desperate to get out. Very tellingly though, however, in recent days, the Taliban issued its own pre-conditions for talks.

Letting out its own quote unquote "confidence building measures", which is diplo-speak. They basically are taking the sort of diplomatic speak of the west and using it against us in their own formal communiques to say that we are demanding the following things in order for us to go forward with talks with the U.S.

I think that shows just who is actually the man in charge in terms of negotiations and pushing the pace of them at this point. Their confidence building measures they want, their concessions they wanted including full removal of the UN terrorist designation list.

They want to basically — it sounds to me like they want an end to the terror designation list altogether when it comes to the Taliban, but certainly other senior figures removed.

They, of course, want their guys freed. They want more mujaheddin who are in the Afghan prisons freed. These are all what they call confidence building measures for talks.

They had stopped the enemy propaganda against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, again referring to themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

This is important for them because they don't like people like me saying, they consider this propaganda to say that they're the prime cause of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. That's actually just a fact, it's not propaganda.

But they want any kind of anti-messaging targeting them to be dropped and they had other preconditions as well. I think it's very telling that the Taliban at this point has preconditions for talks and we don't.

MAY: Question up here.

WATKINS: Thank you. Tom Watkins with AFP. Bill, nice to see you.

ROGGIO: You as well, Tom.

WATKINS: Thanks. I wanted to go back to something you said kind of midway through when you were talking about the military failures that we've seen in Afghanistan over the years and how people have fallen up and been rewarded for whatever the results have been.

Ultimately, military action is political action so these are people, men mainly, who've been doing the task given to them. What would you — with some years of hindsight now, how would you have seen the military leaders in particular wage this campaign differently?

ROGGIO: Obviously, they were subject to their political directives, right? I think that the military's failing here was failing to stand up to — they were enacting a strategy that they knew was doomed to fail.

Everyone knew that the 18 month deadline to end the surge was a failure, but nobody spoke up against it. By failing to speak against it, they're endorsing the strategy and then they're also taking their promotion and basically what a friend of mine calls —

He calls it a Ponzi scheme where the military goes in, they get to punch their ticket in Afghanistan, they get promoted, and then they move on and they hand off the mess to the next guy who does the same thing.

There's just — Jessica's correct. There's no single thing we can point to say this is where we failed, if we just changed one thing. We did a lot of things wrong in Afghanistan but I think the two things that we did primarily which was we were never committed to win the war.

We wanted to allow it to be this slow burn, a denial, keep al-Qaeda from attacking us again, deny it as a safe haven. I think we failed to understand Afghanistan.

If I was to be in front of General Mattis or whoever at the Pentagon, I would say we can't even begin to address this problem until we realistically assess what the problem is.

It's true. Media think that we can identify problems and it's easy to identify the problems, but when people don't recognize those problems, you just can't come up with a solution.

It's impossible for us to even propose solutions until we realistically understand what the problems in Afghanistan are.

MAY: At this point, could you define in a sentence or two, the problem that needs to be addressed? That always needed to be addressed?

ROGGIO: Yeah, we need to recognize the Taliban for what it is, the fact that the Taliban is allied with al-Qaeda, the fact that Pakistan continues to support the insurgency which is recognized but no one seems to want to do anything about it.

That's actually the easiest one. That's one that everyone recognized and complains about but nobody actually wants to take action but it's just too difficult.

JOSCELYN: Including no sanctions. We sanctioned, for example, just recently the government sanctioned, correctly, IRGC officers, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps officers who were working with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

This is an arrangement that's been going on since 2001, but we don't sanction any Pakistani officers who have worked with the Taliban. We haven't used any of this sort of engine for financial sanctions and terrorist investigations which does have a bite to it.

We haven't used that against the sponsors of the Taliban or in Pakistan. You have — everybody knows the Taliban senior leadership is headquartered for the most part in Pakistan. Everybody knows that there are Pakistani officials who are in bed with them and yet, the U.S. government has taken no action to use financial tools.

I'm not even talking about military tools. Financial biting sanctions and terrorist designation tools that could be used against those same individuals.

In fact, to this day, there's all this dissonance even in how we have sanctions and terrorist designations with respect to the Taliban. For example, Haqqani network is designated as a terrorist organization, rightfully so.

Well, Siraj Haqqani is the number two in the Taliban hierarchy. He runs the Haqqani network which is fully integrated in the Taliban. He's also the military warlord of the Taliban and yet the Taliban's not designated.

There's all these logical gaps and holes in terms of how we've approached this and it goes to a fundamental point, which is a fundamental misunderstanding of the enemy.

MAY: Let me just ask Jessica this. Why do you think it is that we — Two questions actually. Why have we not been tougher on Pakistan, who has not been a good ally in this, I think most people would agree? And if the U.S. withdraws, will that benefit Pakistan as the Pakistani government sees it?

DONATI: I mean, I don't know. I think the U.S.'s approach to Pakistan has been political expediency and you see that in a lot of other relationships, not just with Pakistan.

A lot of other countries — it's a complicated relationship and it's not just about Afghanistan, so the U.S. has been limited in that sense. I don't know why they've been reluctant to deal with it. And your second part?

MAY: Second part is if the U.S. withdraws from Afghanistan, does Pakistan benefit?

DONATI: I mean I'm sure some people in Pakistan will think that the ensuing chaos in Afghanistan is to its benefit. But it also depends what happens to Afghanistan in the end.

I mean, I don't necessarily think that an eternal U.S. presence is going to be beneficial. At some point, Afghans need to stand on their own two feet and run their country without interference from any outside source.

In the long run, if that makes them a stronger power, there will be people in Pakistan who are for and against that.

SIVALETTI: Hi, thank you. Melissa Sivaletti, I am currently an FTD fellow in the fellowship and I work for Booz Allen Hamilton. I have a couple of questions.

The first is what is the effect of Raziq's death in southern Afghanistan and do you think that the way all that went down is ultimately going to change the way that General Miller executes strategy?

The second is I'd love to hear your thoughts about what's going to happen with the April presidential election, pending that it happens at all or at least on time.

And then, last, several months ago, maybe almost a year ago, President Trump talked about wanting to exploit the mineral wealth in Afghanistan and I would love to know if you all think that that is even a viable idea.

JOSCELYN: I'll take General Raziq. That was a major, probably the most significant Taliban operation in over a decade, if not since the beginning of the war.

He was the glue that kept security together in southern Afghanistan. His reach extended beyond Kandahar province and the fact that the Taliban could infiltrate — one of its members in the Taliban released a tape of the guy training in a Taliban training camp.

Wounded a U.S. general, killed General Raziq and the head of the NDS in Kandahar, gravely wounded the governor of Kandahar, and General Miller barely escaped.

That's a significant Taliban win and we don't really know the effects. Is there someone that's there to step up for General Raziq? Apparently, his brother's taking charge. Is he as dynamic as Raziq?

Apparently, Raziq was one of those guys and this is common among Afghan warlords, they like to hoard their power, they keep it for themselves. They leave weak successors. I think we're going to find out over the next couple months, but I think it was a major victory.

Propaganda victory and just a major blow. He shows the Taliban's strength and they're not able to infiltrate guys at that high level of a governor's body guard without people in Afghanistan believing that the Afghans are winning.

You want to handle the April election?

DONATI: I mean, if it happens, I think that, as I've said before, I think it's difficult to imagine that it will produce a clear winner because as they've documented here, so little of the country is under government control.

60% or more is contested. They have no way, they don't know the population size. They don't know registration. The test run with the parliamentary election was not — I mean, it was better than we expected but that only, you can only imagine what people were thinking when it happened, because the election was extended over two days.

It wasn't held in two provinces. The ballot boxes disappeared, the monitors had no access. I mean, there was a catalog of problems, worse than had been seen in any previous election and the past two presidential elections produced no winner, hence the NUG, the National Unity Government which Kerry brokered to prevent what seemed to be an approaching war between two sides because no one could agree who had won 2014.

I think the upcoming election is extremely fragile and for the Taliban, this is again another potential win because if this means that no clear government is in charge after the election happens, that puts the Taliban in a stronger position.

It's risky.

ROGGIO: The Taliban is the one entity that had very consistent messaging on the elections by the way. They issued multiple warnings to anyone participating in the elections because even though they like to pretend that they don't kill civilians, they basically said if you're a civilian and you're in one of these voting facilities, whether it be a school or a facility adjacent to a mosque or anything of the sort, we have the sanction to kill you.

They said this very publicly. They issued statements from multiple commissions within the Taliban hierarchy, threatened the elections and then of course, subsequently, the UN

reporting on this says that they did actually kill or wound hundreds of civilians throughout the election process, disrupting it in various areas.

They have a very consistent message when it comes to the elections in Afghanistan. They say that these elections were un-Islamic and they opposed to them and that Afghan civilians shouldn't participate in them, but if you do, we have the right to shed your blood.

I think that's very telling about their sort of motivations going forward.

MAY: Time for probably one more question here.

FINNEGAN: Hey, I'm Connor Finnegan. I'm the State Department reporter for ABC News. Sorry, I have three questions, but I promise to be brief.

Talked a little bit about Pakistan. I can tell you that within the bureaucracy at state and the pentagon, that's where a lot of the opposition to doing more against Pakistan comes from.

But do you think that there's an opportunity presented by Imran Khan's new administration by Pakistan's IMF troubles to work with them as opposed to implementing sanctions or things like that?

Second, I just wondered how much time you thought people like Pompeo or Ambassador Khalilzad had before Trump pulled the plug and began either a draw down or a change in policy?

And then third, if you could just speak briefly to Russia's role. There's a lot of, I think, perhaps too much made of their relationship with the Taliban. Just your understanding of what that relationship is like.

JOSCELYN: I'll take Imran Khan, is that — Yeah, I don't think that'll affect anything. He's basically been a mouthpiece for whatever the military decides on foreign policy, that's what's going to happen in Pakistan.

Imran, that's not his thing. I don't think he really cares about it, he's more than happy to defer to the Pakistani military on foreign policy issues in order to get what he wants domestically.

ROGGIO: Just real quick, I've had talks with senior administration officials and there is a sense that Trump could pull the plug at any time or announce withdrawal at any time and certainly, is negotiations and everything else is being done as Jessica said with that in mind for sure.

But of course, that affects the negotiations, right? I mean, the Taliban smells the desperation to get out and knows that they have a strong negotiating position.

Of course, this is the mess that is Afghanistan can be summarized by if you compare the August 21st, 2017 announcement by President Trump on Afghanistan to the actual actions that

were taken just in one year after that, you would see that we never even held up to what was said in August 21st, 2017.

The whole idea was to beat them back militarily so that they would come to the negotiating table. We didn't beat them back militarily, we desperately ran to the negotiating table and Trump said he was — He wasn't going to have the prospect of withdrawal hanging over any prospective negotiations, because that makes us weak.

Well, of course, what do we have now but of course the prospect of withdrawal at any time? Again, who has the upper hand here? It ain't us.

DONATI: For the Russia, I mean, Russia has the Moscow talks, it was the third or fourth round. It's obviously partly sort of a swipe at the U.S. because they did manage to bring the Taliban and Afghan Guard representatives to the same space at the same time.

Obviously, the U.S. accuses Russia of aiding the Taliban, much as the U.S. aided the mujaheddin against the Soviets. But I don't know whether Russia's role, whether Russia was engaged one way or the other.

I don't think that they have the chance to sort of pivot the war in any particular direction. I think they're more of an irritation than a real weight in the conflict.

ROGGIO: Yeah, I just add one thing to that. Isn't it interesting, the power of anti-Americanism, that the Taliban, which grew out of the mujaheddin effort against the Soviet Union, is willing to now send representatives to Moscow because they both have their own announced animosity for the U.S.?

Right? That shows you how powerful anti-American ideas can be. I'm afraid, I'll just say this as my little bit of pontification. I'm afraid now with our own society that we don't have confidence in ourselves and you can see that have ramifications around the globe.

There are plenty of actors who have loathing and hatred for us and that's why you find situations like the Taliban and the mujaheddin who just got off celebrating, by the way, the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan and the anniversary of that, I think it was 30 years or whatever. Something along those lines, anniversary of that. Or close to it.

Now send a delegation to Moscow. That speaks to me again to the power of anti-Americanism.

MAY: One other question, you can talk about this for an hour, but I'm going to ask you to do it in a sentence or two just because I think it's important to get on the table.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, not exactly a disinterested observer here. They're also playing a role and I think, you tell me, intend to play a role following American withdrawal.

ROGGIO: Yeah, one of the weird elements in all this, it's weird if you know anything about the history of Iran and the Taliban. I'll just say this real quick, is that of course they were at loggerheads in the late 1990s.

They were on the verge of war. Basically, the two really hate each other. As we've documented in this evidence that's held up in a court of law and various intelligence reports, the Taliban actually cut a deal with Iran in late 2001. October 2001.

The Iranians have had various deals with the Taliban since then to support the insurgency. We would argue its second fiddle, of course, to the role that Pakistan has played and that brings up all sorts of issues.

But, the Iranians very much are looking at a Taliban victory in Afghanistan, first and foremost, as an American loss. And again, the power of anti-Americanism speaks there that this is getting the Yankees out of the neighborhood.

JOSCELYN: I would agree with Tom. The Iranian and the Russian influence with the Taliban inside of Afghanistan, I think it's more regionally based and it's more the goal more to see the U.S. lose rather than for the Taliban to support a Taliban victory.

You have some weapons and particularly with the Iranians, there's drug smuggling and what not going on, but weapons are probably going to groups that they see as buffers.

MAY: Jessica, final word?

DONATI: I would just say only that the Taliban's leadership has shifted towards Iran. Mansour, who was killed in a drone shot, was on his way back from Iran where we believe that his family was living and that they were sort of hedging now against Pakistan.

I think that's also weakening Pakistan's influence on the outcome of the conflict there anyway. The current administration's [inaudible 01:16:43] towards Iran is only going to make it more difficult to get Iran to play ball when it comes to the Taliban.

Even if you get Pakistan to do more to deal with the Taliban's leadership, what do you do about all the ones now that are in Iran?

MAY: Well, not an encouraging discussion but it's certainly an important discussion and we need more of them, not fewer of them in this town. We need to be having these debates.

Let me ask you to thank Jessica and Bill and Tom for a good discussion. And again, thank you all here in the room and thank you, those who are at home in your pajamas watching.