

MAY: Hello and thanks for joining us. I'm Cliff May, FDD's Founder and President. Today's discussion comes at a critical moment. The withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Afghanistan is proceeding rapidly – without much attention to the likely consequences. As my colleagues at *FDD's Long War Journal* have meticulously reported: In the past week alone, the Taliban have taken control of at least 10 district centers in four different regions of Afghanistan.

I argue in my most recent column that the odds that the Afghan government will survive without American air support, intelligence, training, and other assistance are not good. I quote General H.R. McMaster who recently said he was puzzled by how many Americans have fallen for the delusion “that wars end when we leave – as if the Taliban will look around [and say]: ‘Hey, the Americans are gone. Let's just stop fighting!’”

I quote also Leon Panetta who has noted that if we abandon to the tender mercies of the Taliban those who have struggled alongside us, in particular, Afghan translators, “that sends a terrible message” to both our allies and our adversaries. You'll find my column on FDD's website, among other outlets.

We have an expert panel with us today to discuss what's happening and likely to happen in Afghanistan, and its ramifications for Afghans and for Americans.

Husain Haqqani is a senior fellow and director for South and Central Asia at Hudson Institute. He served as Pakistan's ambassador to the United States from 2008 to 2011.

David Kilcullen is an Australian-American soldier and scholar. He previously served as a chief strategist at the State Department, and we're honored that he serves on the Board of Advisors for FDD's Center on Military and Political Power.

Finally, my colleague Bill Roggio is editor of *FDD's Long War Journal*, which reports authoritatively and granularly on global conflicts. He has tracked the Taliban's control of Afghanistan on a district-by-district basis since 2014.

Today's conversation will be moderated by Nancy Youssef, national security correspondent at *the Wall Street Journal*.

As I hope you know, FDD is a non-partisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. We do not accept funds from foreign governments. FDD's Center on Military and Political Power seeks to promote understanding of the defense strategies, policies, and capabilities necessary to deter and, if necessary, defeat threats to the freedom, security, and prosperity of Americans and American allies.

For more information on our work, we encourage you to visit our website: FDD.org. You can follow us on Twitter @FDD.

So thanks again for joining us for this important and timely conversation. Nancy, over to you.

YOUSSEF: Thanks, Cliff, for that introduction. I'm really looking forward to an enlightening conversation with such a great panel. Bill, if you don't mind, I'd love to start with you because of some of the work you've done on the provinces and who's holding control of them. We've seen now that the Taliban is moving forces around, near several provincial capitals, and what appears to be a staging for taking those areas back, if not now, soon after the US withdrawal. I'd like to get your sense of what you think their sort of strategy is? What does a potential Taliban offensive look like? From where you sit, where do you see this headed militarily?

ROGGIO: Yes, and thank you, Nancy. It's a pleasure to see you and everyone on the panel. It's good friends and I'm very happy to be here. It's very difficult to get into the mind of the Taliban, to know exactly how they view this. One of the things I've done for the last decade plus is follow their military operations and see what they were focusing on, what was important to them. And it became very clear, particularly after the US began turning over security to the Afghan military and police and then went into a support role where they've trained, advised and it is in this role that the Taliban were working on a sort of a rural insurgency strategy. They're taking control of some rural districts. By the way, there's one district in Helmand that's always been under Taliban control, it's called Baghran, since the US entered the country in 2001.

So, they had a little base there, and then they take control of these rural areas. They establish camps, they go out and recruit, they get fundraising. Of course, all of this is happening on the other side of the border in Pakistan as well. And then they're branching out from these rural areas with the goal of surrounding provincial capitals and major cities. And then eventually, what I believe they're looking to do is, and it's no secret, I mean, they have entered Kunduz City, Farah City and Ghazni City four times in those three different capitals. So, they want to control these. The Taliban's goal is to re-establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. And they're very clear that they're going to do this by force. They call it jihad. So, we've seen over the years that the Taliban has increased its control in contested areas, in rural districts. And then by doing this, they put pressure on the main line of communications, being mainly the ring road, route one, and they're surrounding these capitals. And then they're able to launch forays into them.

Everyone's talking about right now that the Taliban offensive has begun. I think we're still in the stage where the Taliban is still laying the groundwork, it's preparing the battlefield for - What I think they're looking to do, and this is what I would do, really, as the Taliban. I hope I'm not giving them military advice, but I doubt they'd take it from me. It seems it would be smart for them, and what I'm seeing pretty much matches, they're going to probably push to take the south, that'd be Helmand, Nuristan, Kandahar, obviously in the Southeast, you have Zabul and Ghazni, and then move up into the east, ultimately to put pressure on Kabul, the capital.

And what we're seeing in those areas right now is that the Taliban has made major gains, particularly in three provinces, Logar, Wardak and Laghman, and they actually made an attack on Mihtarlam, the provincial capital of Laghman. And they're taking control of key districts - apologies for the very detailed explanation here, but it's what's in my head. Yeah, so they're laying the groundwork. But while they're doing this, they're taking control of districts in the north and in the west, and so they're fighting in all areas and even in central Afghanistan, in Ghor, a very heavily Hazaran, ethnic Hazara area that the Taliban do not like. They took control of a district there just the other day. So, they're keeping up the pressure. They're forcing the Afghan military to spread their forces. And so, I think that this is what we're going to see. The south, they'll work to the east, keep the pressure in the north, and put the pressure obviously on Kabul, that would be a real gem for the Taliban if they can take that.

And the US air power has been critical in stopping the Taliban from overrunning provincial capitals, most recently in Helmand, and in Kandahar. And without this, the Afghans are going to be hard-pressed to defend. And I think one of the things the Afghan military, the Afghan government has to decide where it's going to fight and what it's going to concede. And it would require them to concede large areas of Afghanistan, the south and east primarily, if it wants to defend Kabul, if it wants to clear the Taliban out where it has very, has made major inroads in the north and in the west as well. It's going to have to consolidate these forces, or else the Afghan military risks losing large portions of their military and large quantities of military material.

YOUSSEF: What I find interesting is in your report, you found 17 of 34 provinces under Taliban threat. *Reuters* quoted an Afghan government official saying in 26 to 34, there's fighting. Can the Taliban sustain such a widespread sort of operation where they're threatening so many provinces simultaneously? And I want to open this up to David and Husain as well. And if so, can the Afghan security forces defend against it, particularly in the absence of American and coalition air power?

ROGGIO: Yeah, I'll be very brief on this because I want to hear my friends speak about this as well. I'm very curious what they have to say. Yeah. So, there's 17 provincial capitals which are under threat. A lot of these provinces as well. Think of districts as counties and states here in the United States. And for some districts, I'm not going to name. So, a province may have five districts or they have 10. What I'm seeing is one or two of these districts are Taliban-controlled. The other two or three are contested. That is a picture we're seeing across Afghanistan. So, this is that take control or contest in order to put pressure on the capitals. So, there's, I estimate between 17 and 18 of these provincial capitals. The Taliban could attack these capitals. So, when I'm saying they're under threat, the Taliban are on the outskirts. They may control individual neighborhoods within these cities. That happened in Ghazni, that happened in Kunduz City, happened in Farah City, and it's happening in Lashkargah in Helmand.

So, I mean, right now, what I see is they are able to exert pressure throughout the country. It's happening. It's how the Afghan security forces react, that's what matters. The reality is that the Afghan Security Forces are on the defensive. At this moment, the Taliban has the initiative. It's taking the fight to the Afghan Security Forces. This is why I think it's imperative that they consolidate their forces. I mean, it's horrific to me to think that they are going to abandon large parts of their country to the Taliban, but they risk losing it all if they don't decide to defend some.

YOUSSEF: David, Husain, you're advising the Afghan National Security Forces.

HAQQANI: I disagree with this entire, "The Taliban are coming, the Taliban are coming, the Taliban are coming." The Afghan people resisted the Taliban when not a single American was there to support them. They will resist the Taliban again. The reason why there is a problem is because the United States built a military that cannot be sustained by purely Afghan resources. So, therefore, it's a more expensive military than Afghanistan can afford on its own. And the sudden decision of withdrawal, without ever having built an Afghan air force, is causing problems. And the Taliban are taking advantage of it because they understand the American mind a lot better than the Americans understand their mind. They, for example, never abandoned the idea of the Emirate. In their entire sort of last 20-year period, all Taliban communications have insisted that the Emirate still exists, even if it's on a very small piece of territory. And then they are going to try and expand it.

The Americans agreeing to talk to them instead of discussing the withdrawal with the Afghan government, which is what should have been done, the American decision of President Trump to have negotiations with the Taliban about American withdrawal basically gave the psychological message to the rest of Afghanistan that the Americans are mentally prepared to let the Taliban takeover. And so, the Taliban are pressing everywhere. Bill is right there, they are doing it, but they will not be able to sustain it forever, if the right policy tools are used in ensuring, for example, Pakistan's concerns about a Taliban takeover are actually accentuated and some air support is provided to the Afghan government in the long-term, and there are ways of doing it, figuring out how to do it, the Afghan National Security Forces will fight.

Now, will the Taliban be completely eliminated? Of course not. Just take a look at the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. They took forever to be eliminated. And in the end, they died more because of malaria than because of the fighting. An insurgent group that has a supply and logistical source of source can sustain itself forever, as long as it has a devoted

believing cadre. But will they be able to go back to the '90s very easily? I don't think so. And yes, they are pressing ahead. And yes, they have an advantage right now because of the psychological, the morale busting impact of the Doha deal. But the Taliban are not about to take over all of Afghanistan, and certainly not take over Kabul tomorrow. And when they do, it will not be without a lot of resistance from the Afghan people who resisted them before the Americans got involved and will continue to resist them after the Americans have left.

YOUSSEF: Husain, I want to make sure I understand the sort of scenario as you see it, because there are a lot of ifs that you kind of gave, the air support that's needed, and so far, we haven't seen indications of that - Am I hearing you see a sort of stalemate for an extended period of time? Is that the scenario you see?

HAQQANI: Absolutely. Because the Afghan people are not going to surrender. I don't believe in this notion that the only Afghans - Look, after the Soviets left, Pakistan, with Pakistan and American support, the Mujahideen was supposed to take over Kabul. If you see the CIA assessments from 1989, they said the Mujahideen will take over Kabul within two weeks of the Soviet withdrawal. The Najibullah government survived almost three years, and it survived three years because the Soviets continued to support them. When that support ended, because the Soviet Union collapsed, it's at that point that the Najibullah government collapsed. And then there was infighting among the Mujahideen. And then, of course, the Taliban came about, but even then, the Taliban could not take over all of Afghanistan. A small portion continued to be under the Northern Alliance, which continued to resist.

So, my point is, at that time, they were not getting any support from anybody. Who was supporting the Northern Alliance before 9/11? These guys were somehow managing to meet wage resistance. And so, I think that there will be resistance from the non-Taliban Afghans to the Taliban, even without American support. I would like the Americans to support that resistance and make sure the Taliban don't take over. And if there is to be a peace process, then it has to be a substantive and real peace process in which the weight of the rest of the world should be behind the non-Taliban element of Afghanistan, rather than just saying that a Taliban takeover is a foregone conclusion.

YOUSSEF: David, I'd love to hear your perspective on that.

KILCULLEN: Yeah. So, I'm sort of somewhere in between. And I think we're actually talking about two different things. One is what's happening now. And the other one is the prospects of what's likely to happen in the future. So, let me pick up the first one first. It's very clear that, to me anyway, that the Taliban are pre-positioning themselves for a major offensive that hasn't happened yet. What they're doing is encroaching on a series of district centers, provincial capitals all around the country. The M.O. that you see them doing is essentially surrounding an area, cutting it off for a couple of weeks, and then sending in friendly representatives from the local community or elders that they know to try to negotiate with these very isolated police and military garrisons, a peaceful surrender. And when they can do that, they do. When they cannot achieve that, they'll then move on that district and try to expel the government from that location.

What we typically see from the government in those circumstances are two statements that you hear again and again. One is we need air support. Without air support, we cannot continue to sustain these isolated garrisons. The other one is, almost every time, the government says, "We're going to retake this area. We're going to surge back and seize the area again that the Taliban just sought." The problem, I think, is that that's a setup. What the Taliban are doing is attacking in multiple places to draw the government into an unsustainable circumstance where it just doesn't have the resources to go and retake all these areas. And it risks dissipating that effort, spreading itself too thinly. And that then creates the setup for, once the US has gone, once things are settled down a little bit and they've positioned

themselves, then they make their move. So, to that extent, I really agree with Bill here. I think that's what we're looking at on the ground.

I agree with Husain, though, that absolutely, the Afghan people will fight the Taliban, and absolutely, they will sustain resistance. I also think it's quite unlikely that we're going to see Kabul fall anytime soon, but I don't think Bill's suggesting that, frankly, and I think the Taliban are smart enough not to make a move on Kabul soon because that's almost the only thing that would bring the international community back in force, if it looked like Kabul was going to fall. And we saw during the Obama administration withdrawal in 2014 that the Taliban was smart enough to just sit on their hands for a while, let that withdrawal go through, and then make their move in the following spring of 2015 after the ISAF forces had left. And I think we'll probably see a similar thing there. Where I think I come down a little bit differently from Husain is I don't think that, even though the motivation [inaudible] the government and the Afghan forces, after US and other support of our efforts. I think that's the problem, is whether it's actually feasible for the government to sustain its effort.

YOUSSEF: Sorry, you cut off a little bit. Just to make sure if I heard you correctly, to say that while they might have the motivation to fight back, they might not have the resources and infrastructure essentially set up to do so successfully.

KILCULLEN: That's right. I mean, one of the dynamics in a guerrilla war is that the guerillas position themselves so that they can attack anywhere, which means the government has to defend everywhere, and everywhere is a lot more expensive than anywhere, right? So, the Taliban only needs a few dozen people in every district to be able to sustain that pressure and the government isn't in a position to respond effectively and retake that territory because it can't do all the things it has to do at once. And I think that's the dynamic we're getting into now.

YOUSSEF: So, the connective thread that I hear and everything that the three of you are saying is that there'll be some level of fighting, contested areas for some sustained period of time. And that is that you'll have an Afghanistan that could be, one area is completely under the control of the US-backed government, one area is completely under control of the Taliban, and that there'll be various states throughout. So, my question becomes, in terms of stopping Afghanistan from being a safe haven for terrorism, doesn't that environment lend itself to groups coming in to try to push territory one way or the other, or is the environment that you guys are all foreseeing one that makes it more fertile for outside groups, like al-Qaeda or ISIS, or groups we haven't even heard of yet coming in and trying to be a part of this fight in some way or the other?

HAQQANI: Absolutely. And the point is that the American people have been lied to, especially by those who suggest that the Taliban and al-Qaeda have broken off their relations as a result of the deal with the Americans. They haven't. The al-Qaeda that remains is so - Look, all guerrilla movements, and David was talking about, all guerrilla movements need some external means of support because they need arms, they need money, they need other resources. And in this particular case, we must understand that al-Qaeda was always a means of support because al-Qaeda raises funds internationally, moves them globally. And they were always a means of support for the Taliban, so they are still very much there. And in a contested situation, more and more people will pour in, definitely on the side of the Taliban. And possibly, there might be those who may want to support the Afghan government. We will have international terrorists congregating again in Afghanistan.

KILCULLEN: And just a quick comment. This may seem counterintuitive, but from best to worst, the best circumstance would be one in which a Western-supported Afghan government had full control of Afghanistan. And

that would be the safest in terms of preventing an external attack. The next best would be a complete Taliban control, because then you don't have a lot of space for other players to do what they want to do. And there'd be at least a theoretical possibility of some kind of negotiated outcome to prevent that. The worst outcome is a contested one where it's chaos, there are lots of different places, many different actors can operate and that no one's in full control. And that's a very fertile environment for a situation similar to what we saw in Syria during the first couple of years of the Syrian Civil War, which eventually gave rise to the emergence of ISIS. So, I think the worst possible outcome is actually the most likely, which is a contested environment with a chaotic Afghanistan.

HAQQANI: Sorry, if I can just complete the thought. I don't think that a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is going to be sort of any less dangerous because after all, the moment the Taliban have full control, they will start enforcing their beliefs on the Afghan people. We will go back to a kind of a '90s situation in that, because the Taliban are unrepentant, their beliefs haven't changed, their ideas haven't changed. They're practicing exactly the same things in the areas they control that they did during the 1990s. And so, the consequence of that is going to be the international community out of moral indignation, et cetera, is going to say, "No, we can't deal with this regime." And so, then the Taliban will be in the same position of not having any external support. Pakistan may be forced to continue to deal with them because it's right next door. Iran will probably play, and Iran is not a non-malign actor, it's definitely a malign actor. And so, therefore, a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan will still be a source of problem for the rest of the world.

ROGGIO: Yeah. And I want to counter this narrative, and I know that my fellow panelists here don't agree with this, the idea that the al-Qaeda will return or that they're decimated, this is nonsense. In 2015, the US launched, and this is something I documented, there was a claim there's only 50 to 100 al-Qaeda operators in Afghanistan. It was put out there under the Obama administration for six straight years, up until the point where the US military raided a training camp in Shorabak district in Kandahar, which by the way, borders Pakistan, which is a malign actor in Afghanistan, and a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan will benefit from the support of Pakistan.

But back to my point, that during that raid, 150 al-Qaeda operatives were killed during the fighting and a US general said it was the largest training camp that they had seen since 9/11. Al-Qaeda's there. Then they revised the figures up to 200 to 300 al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. I would argue that number is still low. Look at the United Nations sanctions monitoring team report. They put al-Qaeda at 500, but that they're just talking about core al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda in the Indian sub-continent. Then they mentioned there's upwards of 10,000 foreign fighters, most of these are al-Qaeda affiliates, al-Qaeda branches, al-Qaeda aligned. I could name the groups, but most people won't recognize them.

So, this is the situation that we're in today with a contested Pakistan, as David mentioned, it's very dangerous, it's probably, but I would agree with Husain, a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan would look no different than - A contested Afghanistan is the most dangerous for the Afghan people. They're the ones that are going to suffer in the war. But as far as Taliban support for al-Qaeda, Turkistan Islamic Party and all the other movement of the Taliban and Pakistan, and all these other groups that are operating inside of Afghanistan, contested and controlled will be no different. They'll just have greater support.

I'd like to make just one, Husain, I agree with you, the Afghan people will fight. The question, what I'm arguing is they need to figure out how to fight wisely and fight for what they can defend. The Taliban has its weaknesses. Can it sustain? What is the timeframe? All of these, I completely agree with you on that. There is a fighting spirit. And David is correct, I'm talking about now the hard part of this equation, there's a lot of unknown unknowns, will the US reengage? What does over-the-horizon support look like? That's a joke, and I'm sure we'll get to that later. All of these other factors that factor in. But what I could say, particularly southeast, and then that fighting that's going on elsewhere, that is the

status of the situation today, that it looks really grim. The Afghans, again, I implore them to reorganize their military and determine what and where they can defend and how to defend it. And then you'll have a fight. And that's much better than just conceding to the Taliban.

YOUSSEF: Given that we're all talking about some kind of power vacuum that emerges, at least in the immediate, once the coalition withdraws. And you've talked a little bit about the regional impact in terms of Pakistan. I wonder if we could look at a couple of other countries and the implications of this regionally, and I'll open it up to the floor to ask, one country that comes to mind is Iran. What is the role of an Iran in the absence of a coalition presence and some sort of battle for control of parts of the country, and let's just start there, and then a couple other countries?

KILCULLEN: Let me start, and then throw it to the others. I mean, I think Bill mentioned Ghor district earlier. Sorry, the region of Ghor, which is a Hazara area. There's an organization, the Fatemiyoun, which is Iranian-sponsored militia that fought in Syria and are present in Afghanistan. It is highly likely that we'll see the Iranians providing some kind of support to groups that are fighting the Taliban, but we also have a history of the Iranians making deals with the Taliban as well, or at least local Iranian commanders doing that. Harat is already very heavily, a major city in the Western part of the country, already very heavily influenced from Iran.

And the other Iran factor to just briefly note is that China and Iran have now signed a major 25-year economic and security deal, the China-Pakistan economic program, CPEC, which connects Pakistan into the Chinese Belt and Road system. The Iranian deal is going to allow that to also expand. So, you're going to end up with an Afghanistan that is essentially very influenced by Iran, China and Pakistan, and in the absence of US and NATO presence, the big players will be Iran and China. And I think that'll be a really important factor for any Afghan government of whatever character going forward.

YOUSSEF: What's interesting is you describe the influence of China vis-a-vis its relationship with Iran and Pakistan. I'm curious if you all see an opportunity for China independent of those countries, or an opportunity for China to fill that vacuum. And if so, how does that look and at what risk would they do it?

KILCULLEN: Yeah, again, I'll defer to the others, but China owns very extensive assets in Afghanistan, including one of the largest copper mines in the world. And NATO and US lives have been lost protecting China's ability to exploit those mineral resources. So, I think one of the things that China is going to be thinking about is, okay, what happens to those assets now? Sorry, I think I cut you off, Bill.

HAQQANI: No. China has economic stakes in Afghanistan and they would like them to be protected, but we must be mindful of the fact that for the last, at least several decades, China has been careful not to get directly or obviously involved in civil war situations. They always use proxies and they always use other cutouts. And so, how China would play that remains to be seen. China does have a source of worry from the Taliban itself. And that is the fact that the Taliban have maintained good relations with Uyghur Islamists. And Uyghur Islamists are definitely a red line for China. So, if China feels that a Taliban-controlled or partially Taliban-controlled Afghanistan will end up having training camps, you must remember that in Guantanamo some Uyghurs ended up because they were in Afghanistan under Taliban protection and fighting alongside the Taliban. So, if a similar situation is to be repeated, China will definitely want to avoid that. So, I think the Chinese, as they often do, they're going to play the game in a much more complex manner.

Another thing I would like to point out is that the recent voices coming out of Pakistan seem to indicate that for the first time, Pakistan is a little concerned about the Taliban gaining control in Afghanistan too quickly, because their

concern would be that they would not be able to then hold the line against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistani Taliban. And this has always been, I mean, people like me have opposed any support for the Taliban on grounds that that has adverse implications for Pakistan, but those who have supported them have always argued that, "No, we can use the Taliban in Afghanistan without any adverse impact on Pakistan." But for the first time, people including the head of the army, General Bajwa, have suggested that they feel that a rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan again has implications for Pakistan and Pakistan's relationship with the rest of the world, as well as Pakistan's ability to maintain a sort of economic development.

Now, if that view prevails in Pakistan, and in Pakistan, you can never completely predict what view, as for Islamism in Afghanistan and India, et cetera; you hear voices and then they kind of die down. But if that view prevails, then Pakistan's role might be slightly different than it was in the 1990s. I'm not predicting that will happen, but that is one of the things that we should definitely take into consideration and see if that can be worked upon.

ROGGIO: Yeah. I agree with Husain completely on China, so I won't go into any further detail. They're going to work in mysterious ways. You're not going to see the Chinese military coming into clear Taliban. That's just not going to happen. As far as Iran goes, its influence in Afghanistan will only be regionally, in the Western areas, as David mentioned. Iran has, obviously it has an interest in protecting the Shia Hazara population, but it's also ironically has supported the Taliban. This is well-documented. It's provided aid and support to the Taliban, primarily because it wanted to lead to the US withdrawal or US defeat in Afghanistan. It's a good thing for Iran, but I think that may be a little bit short-sighted because they may get that monster on its border.

One thing we have to keep in mind, on September 10th, 2001, the day before 9/11, the Taliban controlled almost 90% of Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance was bottled up, its headquarters was in Badakhshan, it controlled Panjshir provinces, and then small carve-outs of some other northeastern provinces. So the Taliban maintained effective control. The Iranians didn't like the fact that the Taliban were in control, but there was very little to do about it.

Now, I'll just turn very quickly to Pakistan. I've heard the voices that you had mentioned Husain, but I think Pakistan has played a very, very clever game in convincing - obviously not all Pakistanis, and there are a lot of good people in Pakistan that abhor what is done to its country by the military elements and the military and in the Inter-Service Intelligence directorate, and individuals within government. But unfortunately, these tend to be the most influential voices. The voices you don't hear are the ones that wield the most influence inside Pakistan, and I've seen no indication that those voices want to end their support to the Taliban.

Any concerns that are being voiced, they're only being voiced in the context of, "Well, maybe this leads to a return to the movement of the Taliban in Pakistan," which is the monster that the Pakistani state helped create and it's very little to do with what's actually happening in Afghanistan, what Taliban rule in Afghanistan would look like, terrorist training camps there, et cetera, et cetera. So obviously nations make decisions like this based on their own interests, I'm fine with that, I get that, but I don't think there's any real concern from the Pakistani state about how a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan influences the international community and such.

One very dangerous lesson that that the Pakistani state has learned here is that supporting terrorist groups and pretending to support the United States while backing the Taliban, that's a game that they could win. They won this game right now. I mean, obviously there's a lot of it to play out, but the Taliban are ascendant and if I'm India and I'm neighboring countries in South Asia, I'm very, very concerned about what Pakistan may have in store for me next.

YOUSSEF: I want to-

KILCULLEN: Sorry Nancy, can I just push back a little bit on the implication? I don't think it's deliberate on either Husain or Bill's part, but the notion that some people may have that this will just go back to where it was in the 1990s? It won't go back to where it was in the 1990s, principally, because everyone is just a hell of a lot better armed now than they were in the 1990s. It's going to be significantly worse, right? Larger forces with better equipment, Iranian loitering drones, highly sophisticated IEDs, night vision devices, larger units.

YOUSSEF: You know, the other question that I had was about another partner, the Americans, and one reason the Biden administration said that it was getting out of the war in Afghanistan was that it wanted to focus on China and the Asia Pacific. But in the short term at least, the US ground withdrawal has actually led to the taking away resources out of the Asia Pacific, notably the USS *Ronald Reagan* and given the ground that you're describing and your assessment of it, could we see a scenario where the absence of ground forces and the instability that you foresee in this battle for control of the country, actually taking resources away from the Asia Pacific? That is that you would have an US more dependent on air and naval power to sort of have its influence in the region, such that the absence of ground forces has actually forced more of an air and naval presence? And is that something we should be worried about?

ROGGIO: Sure. I'll start with that. I could see a scenario where a terrorist attack emanates from Afghanistan and the US is forced to re-engage. If things play out as they are right now, and there's the countries surrounding Afghanistan, let's face it, Iran is not going to host US bases; it's an enemy of the United States. Pakistan has said it wouldn't. I believe them. They paid a very heavy price in that part of the support for the US. And then the Stans, they're beholden to the Russians who I think are going to make the United States pay for all of the diplomatic problems that exist between the two.

So if there's a terrorist attack and the US has to respond, how is it going to do it? It's going to have to do it using air and naval power. Air power, probably based out of either Diego Garcia and/or in Qatar, and in naval power, obviously, from the Indian Ocean. If you want to conduct operations to target al-Qaeda and if you want to take that another level, because you want to put the Taliban in the same basket, as you should, because they're hosting al-Qaeda to carry out that attack, well, then you're going to tie up significant American resources to accomplish it.

This is just one of several scenarios that I can think of. Obviously, another being, if the US does want to prevent the fall of Kabul, maybe that's six months down the line, a year down the line, two years down the line. But if there's a big fight there and the US wants to weigh in on that fight, well, again, you're going to have the same problem.

HAQQANI: Now we also have to contend with ISIS in the region. We don't know whether ISIS is basically just extremist TTP elements from Pakistan, or is there real substantive ISIS, we'll find out over the next several months, but there is definitely going to be an ISIS presence as well. So not having ground forces, not having bases in Afghanistan, that will definitely limit America's ability to respond and react.

But there's another thing that I'd like to draw attention to, and that is that the American withdrawal and the circumstances of the American withdrawal and the prospect of the Taliban actually having a relatively quick victory, if they do, that will play into the global jihadi narrative of jihad defeated the Soviet Union, a superpower, jihad defeated the Americans with all their might, Allahu Akbar, let us continue with jihad.

YOUSSEF: To what end? To what end?

HAQQANI: What has been the end of jihad all these years, Nancy? It has always been to try and bring down the overwhelming power. The way they look at it is very different from the way people in America look at it. Let me-

YOUSSEF: I'm sorry, I wasn't clear. In terms of the boundaries of that, does it go beyond Afghanistan? Does it inspire other parts of the region?

HAQQANI: Of course it goes beyond Afghanistan. The global jihad is always about attacking America's power or anybody else's power with less and limited means. There used to be a saying that, "A suicide bomber is just a poor man's F-16." So basically, what they will continue to do is we may have in a new wave of international terrorism.

Now, I know that there are a lot of smart people in Washington, DC, who say, "Because of 9/11, we have put in a lot of intelligence resources into play. We have not had a significant terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11, and those are achievements." Yes, they are.

But at the same time, you must remember that just as 9/11 was unanticipated, it's all a question of the jihadists' imagination. If they can imagine and conceive and do something that can cause significant damage with very limited resources, they will try to do it. So we will have a resurgence of global terrorism after things settle down in Afghanistan.

YOUSSEF: Now-

ROGGIO: And if I may-

YOUSSEF: Sure. Of course, Bill. No, of course.

ROGGIO: If I may build on Husain's point, and thank you for your straight talk on the Washington talking heads, I always appreciate that, Husain, that's why I love you. Their goal, al-Qaeda's goal, the jihadist's goal is to establish a global caliphate and it's not just to fight the United States, it's to reestablish that Islamic emirate, or Islamic caliphate.

Afghanistan is just one emirate within that global caliphate, right? So they take over countries then add them, those are states within the caliphate. If what happened in Afghanistan, stayed in Afghanistan, this entire conversation would be moot. By the way, this is what people felt in the mid- to late-1990s, and really up to September 10th, 2001 that, "Well, it's a local problem. It's not our problem. If they want to impose Sharia-

HAQQANI: Bill, it was impossible to get an editor in Washington or in New York to accept an op-ed about Afghanistan in those days. I tried, I assure you, nobody thought it was important. The Taliban were a local factor. That's why when I hear people, including the president of the United States say, "Oh, but there are issues. Yes, we care about women in Afghanistan, et cetera, but those issues are their issues and we can support them in other ways." They don't seem to acknowledge the fact that things did not stay in Afghanistan.

ROGGIO: Yeah. I mean, and think about that Husain. Here we are, 20 years later, we still don't understand the nature of this problem. We still don't understand what the Taliban is, what its ties to al-Qaeda are. The UN report that came out as a footnote in there. In footnote number 11, from the sanctioning and monitoring team that says, "Sirajuddin Haqqani" He's one of two deputy amirs of the Taliban, arguably the most powerful and influential Taliban leader. He also leads the Haqqani network. It says, "He's assessed to be an al-Qaeda leader."

What does that mean? What is the Taliban? What is the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda? What does this mean about if the Taliban takes control of large areas of Afghanistan and its deputy amir, its most powerful and influential leader is also part of al-Qaeda's leadership?

Here we are 20 years, what happens in Afghanistan does not stay in Afghanistan. If you want to look at this, purely as an American and say, "Well, that's a threat to our national security." There's so many levels of this. We should care about the Afghan people. We should care about what we've done to try to improve things there. We should care about abandoning women to the predations of the Taliban and interpreters and anyone else who's worked with us.

We should also care about our national security. These are not conflicting interests. As a matter of fact, it's the case to continue to help the Afghan people. It could be done on a humanitarian level and a national security level. At least these are joint interests that we have and it's horrific that everyone just wants to turn away from Afghanistan because, "It's not my problem."

The one argument - I'll stop here. The one argument that I hear made, "Well, the jihadist strategy, it's blossomed. It's not just in Afghanistan, we have to worry about this place and that place." So think about that. Prior to 9/11, September 10th, 2001, al-Qaeda operating in Afghanistan, alongside the Taliban and then operating at a cellular level in a smattering of countries, in Pakistan, in Yemen, in North Africa and in Somalia.

But today, you have actual al-Qaeda branches with tens of thousands fighters under their command in Syria, in Somalia where the - I call them the- it should be Shabaab, which is al-Qaeda's branch. They're basically- the Shabaab is the Taliban of Eastern Africa. They have tens of thousands fighters and control 25% of that country, and I could go on and on, in Yemen, and I'm not even talking about the Islamic State here.

So, and as Husain said, the rallying cry from the victory in Afghanistan, this is something that cannot be underestimated. We saw this in Iraq, and in Syria, when the Islamic State, the bastard child of al-Qaeda, when they were able to declare their caliphate, when they were able to control territory, thousands of Westerners and others flocked to the banner and we had a spread of terrorism throughout the world, in the West, in the United States. You would have thought we had learned the lesson of Iraq, but instead, we decided to forget the lesson.

HAQQANI: There's another thing that I would like to say. That is that there are spin-offs of the collapse of states as well, for example, Somalia and its civil war. One of its spinoffs was the rise in piracy, sea piracy, if you remember, off the coast of Eastern Africa. Similarly, the drug trade in Central Asia and Afghanistan, that has been a spinoff of the chaos that comes from prolonged civil war.

So I, with due respect to everybody, sort of who looks at national security in very- shall we say, in silos, you have to have some ability to think about things differently from your parameters. So after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the consensus in Washington was, "Ah, okay. Now we can focus on sort of rebuilding and reconnecting with Eastern Europe and expanding NATO." Well, all of a sudden came 9/11, and something else became the focus. I am just suggesting that at least spend some time and energy thinking about all of those potential spinoffs that will come about from a new wave of chaos.

And we haven't even talked about the attempt to try and avoid the chaos, which is a half-hearted attempt by those trying to project withdrawal as the beginning or the centerpiece of a peace process. The Taliban are not willing to discuss peace. They weren't willing to talk to other Afghans seriously when the US was militarily involved. Now that the US has

declared that it's getting out, why should they? Why would they? And yet there is a pretense, a fig leaf of a peace process continuing, and that flawed Doha agreement, which has really empowered the Taliban and legitimated them and given nothing to the Afghan government in return.

ROGGIO: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. That peace process was flawed. I'm going to make one real quick point because you had asked a great question, Nancy, and that was US forces in the region, what does this, leaving the region- US Pacific Command has four times as many troops, assets in its command than all of the other US commands combined. Think about that. What is a couple of thousand troops in Afghanistan or keeping contractors in a base open? Look, the reality is the withdrawal's happening. This is water under the bridge. But that entire argument that we need to take these several thousand troops out of Afghanistan so we could focus on China is absolutely absurd, from a straight manpower standpoint. These are just excuses that are given for withdrawal because, frankly, no good reason could be given other than I don't want to be involved in the Afghan war anymore.

HAQQANI: American public opinion has shifted.

ROGGIO: It has.

HAQQANI: It's not an issue on the top of the agenda here, and politically, everybody wants to say, "Yes, we are ending forever wars," and whatever What the heck is a forever war? If the infamous 100 Years War in Europe was only 100 years, it wasn't a forever war. But these are cliches. Washington loves cliches. The media loves them. And so, everybody goes, "Oh, forever war." 20 years, basically, actually 20 one-year wars, because there was never a 20-year plan. America didn't go in there in 2001 thinking we will be there for 20 years, and this is what we will do. It was an ad hoc decision-making. And unfortunately, there is ad hoc decision making again, which will have similar consequences because something will happen. Everybody will react to it. It will be the front-page news. It will be the main evening news. And then once that happens, then we will get back involved. The US is leaving Afghanistan only to come back to Afghanistan.

ROGGIO: Yeah. And US support has dropped because of these cliches, because of poor leadership. And sure, it's not a forever war, but it is a forever jihad.

HAQQANI: From the other side, from the other side. Yeah. And you cannot deal with forever jihad with ad hoc one-year decisions.

YOUSSEF: David, I wonder if you would indulge me, while I be a little bit of a contrarian, just because why not?

KILCULLEN: Sure.

YOUSSEF: And I'm trying to advocate for the American public seeing this. If after 20 years, whether it be 20 one-year wars or a 20-year war in continuation, the state is where it is, such that it's so fragile, and there'll be so many possible battles for control. And as you say, Husain, that the US presence might have hampered the Afghan National Security Force's ability to really come up with a battle plan to combat the Taliban.

I wonder if you would act as policymakers and answer for the American public, what is the right strategy going forward? Why does the US presence at 2,500, would that have been a sufficient solution? If after 20 years, however it was fought, the US ends up at this place, is that not an argument that perhaps it is simply not equipped to create the ground such for an independent, say, secure Afghanistan?

So I wonder if you could help those who watch, say, who are policymakers in particular, what are the recommendations going forward? What are we taking from these past 20 years and where the state is, and the decision to leave? How do we construct a viable policy going forward that mitigates some of these risks that you're talking about?

KILCULLEN: I might just chime in initially. There are two separate but related objectives that have been around for the 20 years of our involvement. One is the counter-terrorism objective. The other one is a nation-building objective, and that nation building has been painted as the precursor or the prerequisite for an effective counter-terrorism strategy. I think going forward, we have to decouple those and say, we don't have to build necessarily a Western-style, Eurocentric governance structure in Afghanistan in order to prevent international terrorism from expanding from Afghanistan. There are good reasons to do nation-building in Afghanistan, but that's a separate question. And I think the American people have made it very clear. They're just not interested in continuing the effort. And frankly, why would they be after the series of failures that we've seen over 20 years?

I think we need to also decouple the military from the governance and the political piece. We have successfully defeated the Taliban militarily multiple times since 2001. In every case, we failed to translate military battlefield success into a functioning governance structure that can fill the vacuum that the Taliban used to fill. And frankly, this has always been a significant challenge for the Afghan government. And I think I agree with Husain, that us providing the training wheels and funding a series of efforts in Afghanistan has actually removed the motivation, the survival motivation, from a lot of political elites in Afghanistan of doing the right thing.

And I think the worst betrayal here is of Afghan political elites betraying their own soldiers and police, and their own people in rural environments who are now at the mercy of the Taliban again. So look, I think if I were to go forward, I would want to think about this from an unconventional warfare or special warfare standpoint, from a conventional standpoint, that I would be seeing that as a tiny part [inaudible] To hold the loyalty and effectively govern its own population. And no foreigner can do that. That's a problem for Afghans alone.

YOUSSEF: So, I wondered, Bill, Husain, if you'd pick up on those points. If what you've described really is an Afghanistan that remains a threat to US national security, it could pose new threats in the post-withdrawal period. If the military is not the solution and governance can't be done by outside powers, if you're a US policymaker, is there a recommendation that you think they should consider going forward?

HAQQANI: I have a very simple recommendation, have had it for years. It is that you basically need to support the Afghan government, have a realistic conversation with them, in which you determine what are their military needs, realistically from an Afghan perspective, not on what will benefit American contractors, and basically come up with a support package, training and advice, definitely. And that's about it.

We must understand it takes about 35 years for a second lieutenant to become a general in most conventional armies. Now, the US started training Afghan military officers, somewhere in 2005, 2006. They haven't - the first person trained as a second lieutenant has not yet become a general. So they actually have a problem in terms of serious top leadership of the military. That's why they need advisers. They do not have air power which will be needed, which most countries need, and they will need that. And then they will need some support for maintaining the military, given the paucity of resources that they have.

Lastly, I think the US needs to have a serious policy about countries that support groups like the Taliban, and the US needs to have a policy for itself. Because you can't, after 20 years of describing somebody as a terrorist group, then all

of a sudden invite them for tea and biscuits and a wonderful meal at the Ritz-Carlton in Doha. And so, I think that that is something where the clarity is needed. And it's time to have that discussion of what are the minimum needs of an Afghan government that exists. And then let the Afghans figure it out. There will be problems. There will be political issues, but there is no need for the State Department to send representatives to negotiate between President Ashraf Ghani and chief executive Abdullah Abdullah. Let that be their issue, let them take leadership, but provide them the means to maintain their country and put up a resistance to the Taliban.

And eventually, I think that if the Taliban - Look, it's not just the Americans who've been fighting for 20 years, the Taliban have been fighting for 20 years too. And so, the Taliban will also, at some point, get tired and say, "We need to figure out what to do," except that the ideological hard core, as Bill Roggio rightly points out, believes in a forever jihad. For them, the jihad without attaining an end is in itself an end. And so, there will be problems with global jihadists, including global jihadists in Afghanistan. And has to be prepared to deal with them for the long-term.

YOUSSEF: Bill, I'll give you the final word.

ROGGIO: Sure. And I'll be brief. I've been hearing reports about the, and I actually remember looking into this a couple of months ago, "tired Taliban" since 2005. They don't look very tired to me. They look like a group that's still willing to fight. A matter of fact, I think it's a group that's smells victory. At least that's how they perceive it. They got the US to leave.

I agree with Husain's advice. The first thing I would do is just de-link from this peace process, this so-called peace process. It never was. It was always about the Taliban getting the US to withdraw. This is a waste that diplomatic energy, it's a waste of American taxpayer dollars, because you know that we're paying for it. And the US and NATO, everyone needs to sit down and have a realistic assessment of what is actually happening in Afghanistan. How is the Afghan military performing, the corruption in the Afghan government, and figure out a way to actually fix these problems because everything was fine and good while the US was there, and we weren't at somewhat of a collapse point, like we could be now. And again, this could be in regions and whatnot.

But now, this is serious business now. And we can't have this happy talk about remnant a;-Qaeda, and our security forces are perfectly set up to fight the Taliban. Meanwhile, only one of 12 districts that have been taken by the Taliban over the last month have been cleared by the Afghan Security Forces. They're incapable of taking 11 of 12 districts that the Taliban has taken. So, this perception that the Afghan government and the Afghan military has that everything will be fine, that they're winning. They need to get down to serious business, serious individuals within US government and US military need to sit down with them, devise a plan, and provide the assistance as Husain recommended.

YOUSSEF: Well, I, for one, have really enjoyed this conversation. I wish it could continue because I learned so much from all of you. And I just want to thank you all for taking the time to be with us today and for your insights on this really important topic. And I'm sorry, we just hit the tip of the iceberg, and I hope we can do it again soon.

For those tuning in, if you haven't already, please sign up for updates through fdd.org, and so you can see the work of our panelists, whenever it comes out. And so I'd like to thank everyone for joining us. I hope we get to see you again soon. Thank you.

HAQQANI: Thanks, Nancy.

ROGGIO: Thank you, Nancy.