

DE LUCE: Welcome, and thank you for joining us today. It is August 15th, the two-year anniversary of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. I am Dan De Luce, national security reporter at NBC News and I'll be your moderator for today's discussion.

Joining me today are three experts on Afghanistan and the region who will discuss the current state of affairs two years since that U.S. exit and where things may go from here. Our focus will not be on everything that preceded the withdrawal or the withdrawal itself but what has transpired since that day.

Our first panelist – anyone who has paid any attention to Afghanistan or Pakistan has – knows her name, has read her work – Kathy Gannon, formerly served as news director and chief correspondent for the *Associated Press*, covering Afghanistan and Pakistan for 35 years.

She was the only Western journalist allowed by the Taliban to return to Kabul during the U.S.-led coalition's assault on Afghanistan that began in October 2001. In April 2014, Kathy was seriously wounded, hit by seven bullets while covering preparations for Afghans' national elections when a police officer opened fire on the car that she was in. After undergoing 18 surgeries, she returned to Afghanistan and Pakistan to cover the Taliban's rise, elections, and sexual abuse in Islamic madrasas.

Our second panelist, Edmund Fitton-Brown, is a former British diplomat and coordinator of the UN analytical support and sanctions monitoring team concerning the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. He and his team tracked and reported on the implementation of sanctions against U.S. – UN-designated groups and affiliated individuals.

Within the UN, he was responsible for assessing the global threat from these groups. Previously, Edmund served as British Ambassador to Yemen and regional counselor for the Arabian Peninsula. He's served in Riyadh, Cairo, Kuwait, among other locales.

Our last panelist, Bill Roggio – Bill is a senior fellow at FDD and editor of FDD's *Long War Journal*. He also has a podcast. He's president of the non-profit media company Public Multimedia. Bill was embedded with the U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Army and Iraq forces in Iraq between 2005 and 2008, and with the Canadian Army in Afghanistan in 2006.

From 1991 to 1997, he served as a signalman and infantryman in the U.S. Army in New Jersey National Guard. His articles have been published and in – cited in major news outlets, such as *CNN*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and others.

Just a quick note, they want me to mention, that FDD has operated as an independent, non-partisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. FDD does not accept foreign government funding.

So welcome. Let's get started. What a pleasure it is to join you. Bill, I will turn to you first to set up our discussion. Can you give us please an overview of what's played out on the ground in the two years since the United States left Afghanistan?

ROGGIO: Well, first, Dan, Kathy, and Edmund, thank you again for joining us. It's – a real pleasure to have you all. I've been in contact with all of you during the various points up until – and after the withdrawal, and I can't think of three people I would rather have this conversation with. It's a – welcome to our panel. Thank you very much.

Yeah, it's been an interesting two years in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover. And I'm going to – I don't want to rehash the past here but our failures – U.S. failures, the Afghan government failures in Afghanistan, were decades in the making and it – all culminated with the decision to withdraw that began – under the Obama administration, was pursued with that ridiculous peace deal – so-called peace deal with the Trump administration, and then President Biden's ill-thought-out withdrawal that really gave the Afghan government no chance whatsoever to recover.

That was – that all led to these bad decisions, inability to understand the nature of our enemy, a lot of wish-casting with believing that the Taliban would moderate, would incorporate or share power with an Afghan government, a lack of understanding of the – enduring ties between the U.S.-Taliban relations.

And this is important now because – I think the US is making a lot of the same mistakes when assessing what the Taliban is and how it's pursuing its policy in Afghanistan. Today, it's – treating the Taliban as a partner, when today, after the – withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban is the dominant – it – it is the government of Afghanistan, it – it has resurrected its Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The Taliban has near total domination of the security situation in Afghanistan, it – it has ruthlessly put down the national resistance, like groups like the National Resistance Front and the Afghanistan Freedom Front.

They're – subjugated to these minor guerrilla insurgencies, groups like the Islamic State Khorasan Province, which a lot of people think is the real threat that emanates from Afghanistan. It's a minor player. The Taliban holds all of the cards, the Taliban has – can muster hundreds of thousands of fighters, it controls all 34 provinces, it has the weapons and ammunition and bases and war materiel left over from the U.S. withdrawal that was the materiel given to the Afghan military. So it's able to dominate the security situation there.

But the – Taliban alliances with – it – terror groups has flourished since the U.S. withdrawal, and keep in mind those alliances were strong while the US was present there. The – the – a recent report from the – these – analytical support and sanctions monitoring team, which Edmund previously led, excellent reporting from that group over the years. It's – been an integral part of my work in helping to understand the nature of the threat.

It's saying there's six provinces where al-Qaeda's running training camps, the – al-Qaeda is running safe houses in multiple provinces, it has a media operations center in – one province. In one of these camps, al-Qaeda is training suicide bombers for a group known as the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan, which is basically – an Afghan Taliban subsidiary, its leader swears allegiance to the – to the Emir of the Afghan Taliban.

The – this is – Afghanistan has essentially reverted back to pre-9/11, except there is no Northern Alliance to resist the Taliban. The northern alliance prior to 9/11 patrolled any – at different time – points in time, anywhere from, say, 10 to 20 percent of the territory in Afghanistan. Today, the Taliban is in full control of the country.

And al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups do not operate training camps within Afghan territory without the explicit support and approval of the Taliban. The – UN report – the sanctions and monitoring team report also noted that several dual – what I would describe as dual-hatted al-Qaeda/Taliban leaders are serving within the Taliban's government. Two of these individuals I have tracked for well over a decade and detailed their ties to both al-Qaeda and the – Taliban. So – this is the situation we see today.

And, you know, there is this I call it the piece of the Taliban. It's – there is no active fighting like it was on a daily basis while the US and – NATO were present in Afghanistan but that's because the Taliban is ruling in a – in oppressive way. It's – ruthlessly puts down its opposition.

So while there may not be fighting, the Afghan people are suffering under the harsh rule of the Taliban and – the Taliban, by the way, back to the point of terrorist groups, the Taliban denies that terrorist groups are even operating within the Afghan territory.

And this is – this is – you know, this is another one of the Taliban's big lies. This was part of the Doha agreement, and I think – you know, yes, we could look at al-Qaeda remembers Ayman al-Zawahiri, the last emir of the Taliban was killed in a safe house in a Kabul – almost, uh, just over two years ago – or I'm sorry, just over one year ago, it was on July 31st 2022.

That should have been all the evidence we needed that – that al-Qaeda had – had – believes that Afghanistan is a safe haven for it. But these training camps, what we're seeing today, the – Taliban support of the movement of the Taliban in Pakistan, which is actively launching an insurgency in – that has been active – actively fighting an insurgency in Pakistan, launching attacks near daily – deadly attacks that are impacting both Afghan refugees there as well as Pakistani civilians and soldiers and police.

The –Taliban is – it's destabilizing the region, even as regional governments want to create ties to the Taliban. This is a very dangerous situation, not just for the United States and for the west, but for the entire region.

DE LUCE: Bill, thank you for that. If I could now maybe turn to Kathy, I'd like to get your reaction to that and also what can you tell us about how life for Afghans has changed since the Taliban seized power and how maybe it hasn't changed?

And – and I just wanted to read one thing to you Lynne O'Donnell in – Foreign Policy Magazine wrote: "Two years on, Afghanistan's people are mostly bereft of rights, education, jobs and hope." Is – is that overstating things?

GANNON: Yes, I – I think that it is not as straightforward. I think just enough to go –backward, but just to have a context between now and then, if you asked people – there was a survey done in 2018 and people were asked do you have any faith in the future, and so, that goes to your question of hope.

And barely 3 percent said they had any hope for the future – that was in 2018. So, I think you have to – if you're looking at where they are today, you have to say well, you know, when the – two years ago, the – the poverty level was 54 percent, the – 85 percent of the ink – of the money in Afghanistan came from outside, all of which stopped once the Taliban took power.

Now – and also to say and – and be able to make some very good points of course, as he always does, first the Taliban and – and – were not coming into Kabul on August 15th, and I'm not in any way suggesting that they wouldn't have – but they weren't coming into Kabul on August 15th.

There was Hamid Karzai, and I did talk to him at length, and Abdul hat they were on their way to Doha. Had President Ghani not left – and this is also the opinion of those, that had President Ghani not left, had he stayed there

and allowed for a negotiation, it might have been a different arrangement in Kabul post-August 15th. President Ghani chose to leave.

Have things changed dramatically for Afghans in the past two years? Let me say that poverty –was excruciating in many parts of the country before the Taliban arrived. It has been exacerbated, of course, because of the lack of international money that –is there.

Girls – girls and women are the – greatest victims post-Taliban. And so, I'll say that right up front and – that is not to say that most Afghans do not want girls to be educated, because they do, but there's a lot of –nuance to that in how they want them to be educated and the – and the reality is outside of the cities, there's a very different – not that they don't want the girls to be educated, because they do want education, but it looks different than what you might think in Kabul, it would look like.

And – and also, if you could – just to give a little bit of a context, yet another survey, and this time, it was in 2019, and men were asked do you think women have too much freedom right now? And the majority of the men in Kabul, at that time, said first they would not want their wives to work and second, they thought the women had too much freedom.

That does not in any way suggest that people support the – horrible and regressive edicts, absolutely not, but the reality is in Kabul – and I want to say because I haven't been there since May last year, women are out.

Yes, they are – you know, fully covered. They are out in groups of women. They are not being beaten in the street every day, but they are out and – and – and yes, there is a problem with going to school, with work. It's very, very difficult because you have such a large number of widows, so it's – it's a – it's a very difficult situation for women and girls.

The other side of it is security is better. Yes, you could say what the Taliban were responsible for a lot of that security problems, absolutely no question, but so was the government. And if you – look back and it was this – Department of Defense, I believe, who said there was an ISIS person within the security detail – the former NDS had.

So – so, it's very – it's a – the allies were a very murky bunch as well. al-Qaeda Chief Osama Bin Laden was not brought to Afghanistan by the Taliban, he was brought to Afghanistan by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf through territory – through areas where Massoudin charge, the former Minister in the post-Taliban government gave a speech welcoming him to Afghanistan.

So, it's not a real cut and dry situation in Afghanistan. It's a deeply complicated one. And the allegiances to these militant groups, to different people is a very complex picture.

Are the Taliban a threat to the US? Because that's clearly, I think, more of an importance to most than is the situation of Afghans. I mean really, 20 years you were there, spent billions of dollars – billions of dollars and even today, very few people are in Afghanistan to look outside at the capital and outside of the elite. There's a – 38 million people in that country. It's a very complicated country.

And so, for me, I just want to make the point that the situation there is not as black and white, good versus bad, it's a very complicated – but people are – for sure economically deprived. It's a serious situation for –their own wellbeing in

terms of their families, women and – and – and girls are suffering, especially widows who cannot easily find work to – to support their family.

The other side of it, the corruption has been significantly reduced, which has given more money into the economy. Yes, the Taliban do not share power, not question, absolutely. I was there during their last time in power between 1996 and 2001, again, did not share power, absolutely true.

Would it have been different had Ashraf Ghani stayed, had there been some more negotiation had Ashraf Ghani been willing to negotiate and not hold on to power? Perhaps. Is the NRF, the National Resistance Front – is that any different than – I mean they – they were in power for 20 years.

When the Taliban were in power between '96 and 2001 – and I'll wrap it up real quickly – there was very little resistance. There wasn't a chance of a military defeat of the Taliban during that time.

The Northern Alliance was limited to a small part of Takhar Province. Then Badakhshan Province, during that time, stayed with the Northern Alliance. This time, it was one of the first provinces to fall. There's a lot of reasons for that, and – a lot of reasons is there was no commitment to the government of Afghanistan from the soldiers.

There was – they didn't feel a part of it, so there's – it's such a complicated situation that – that to try to give it a – a black and white, good versus evil, these are the bad guys, these are the good guys, very difficult. But in the end, Afghans, like they did for the last 20 years, like they did when the Soviets were there, because I was also there then, have always been caught in the middle.

And while people say we're doing this for Afghans, rarely, rarely is that the truth.

DE LUCE: Thank you, Kathy. I want to return to a point introduced by Bill about the Taliban's relationships to extremist groups across Afghanistan.

Edmund, the UN monitoring team recently published a report detailing the persistence and presence of groups like al-Qaeda, a group President Biden had said was "gone" from Afghanistan, but of course, other officials in the administration have acknowledged al-Qaeda's still present in Afghanistan, as is of course, the ISIS affiliate.

And the intelligence community has talked about al-Qaeda having a safe haven in Afghanistan, but that they seem preoccupied with their immediate local situation, and were not in a – didn't seem to be in a position to organized external attacks. And a similar al-Qaeda's threat, according to the intelligence community depends – is contingent on is relationship with the Taliban.

Tell us more Edmund, if you could about that relationship and – how the Taliban regime relates to not only al-Qaeda, but – other extremist groups?

GANNON: Sure. Absolutely. Let me just put a little bit...

DE LUCE: Kathy, sorry, this was for Edmund – sorry...

GANNON: Sorry – sorry, I apologize.

FITTON-BROWN: Thanks, Dan. And – and thanks for the invitation to participate in this splendid event with these incredibly distinguished contributors. It's really hard to follow the tour of force of expertise from – both Bill and Kathy, but I will try.

There are in fact, two recent UN reports, one – was published in June, purely on Afghanistan, and the second was published last month, with a global focus on ISIL and al-Qaeda, and I'll draw from –these in my answer.

Now, the monitoring team, which I used to be the Coordinator of draws on its – it draws reporting from UN member states, including their intelligence and security agencies. And the United States is one the monitoring team's most important sources of information.

Now, the team's reporting is clear that al-Qaeda and a number of associated extremist groups are present in Afghanistan. The impressive surgical strike that President Biden ordered to kill Ayman al-Zawahiri just over a year ago did not eradicate that al-Qaeda presence.

It is true that none of al-Qaeda's top leaders are currently located in Afghanistan. Zawahiri's successor Saif al Adel is in Iran with several other al-Qaeda senior leaders, but al-Qaeda retains its longstanding partnership with the Taliban.

And Bill spoke of the training camps, in fact – and I -- need to focus myself around Bill's remarks because he's – already done a very good job of representing some of the main features of the monitoring team's reporting.

He also referred to the Taliban's lies about the presence – or rather a claim to be the absence of foreign extremists in Afghanistan, something that we had to deal with throughout my time with the monitoring team was that the Taliban, regardless of the strength of the evidence presented would just lie every time that – that al-Qaeda were not there, foreign extremists were not there.

They – even lie now about al – al-Zawahiri having been killed in Kabul. They say there's no evidence to that effect – prevents al-Qaeda from actually crowning Saif al Adel as their leader, because if they do so, they would actually be contradicting the Taliban's narrative, so it's a – there's a sort of comic dimension to that as well.

Al-Qaeda has regularly renewed its pledge of allegiance to Taliban leader Hibatullah and his predecessors. De-facto Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is a close associate of al-Qaeda, indeed some have said he is effectively a member of al-Qaeda's leadership.

And the U.S. authorities, of course, still have a bounty on his head. The regional al-Qaeda franchise, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, AQIS, is present in Afghanistan, partially embedded in Taliban controlled military and paramilitary forces.

Al-Qaeda author – authored doctrine is being taught in Taliban military units. And Abu Ikhlas al-Masriwas reported by the monitoring team in February to be active again in Eastern Afghanistan and reactivating an Al-Qaeda associated Special Forces unit.

Now, you –ask about the views of the current United States administration, all that said it's – this implicit question why we have this sort of – a little bit of political turbulence around this analysis.

My understanding is that not all U.S. agencies and departments agree among themselves. Some agree with most of the monitoring team reports, some do not. The more cautious voices in the US reflect the absence of good options to address Afghanistan under Taliban control, and the sincere belief, I think that the threat from al-Qaeda in Afghanistan is adequately mitigated by – you know, the over the horizon capability, the potential for operations like the strike on Zawahiri.

I myself would agree that neither al-Qaeda, nor ISIL in Afghanistan currently has the capability to strike U.S. interests, but I don't agree that we can assume that beyond the short term. And I would love to see this overall analysis on this issue depoliticized.

Thank you.

DE LUCE: Really fascinating, Edmund. That was interesting.

Bill, I'd like to get your response, but I want to read something to you first. The – in – February, in the intelligence community's Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment to Congress, they addressed al-Qaeda and Afghanistan and they said al-Qaeda viewed the Taliban's seizure of power as a victory for the global jihad, but that the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2022 will "disrupt the group's plans in Afghanistan."

And also it said "al-Qaeda probably will gauge its ability to operate in Afghanistan under Taliban restrictions, and will focus on maintaining its safe haven before seeking to conduct or support external operations from Afghanistan." And it said "the threat from al-Qaeda in Afghanistan will depend on the Taliban." What's your response to what Edmund was saying? And also, to that intelligence assessment?

ROGGIO: Yeah, I – they both. I actually agree with that assessment. And obviously, I agree what Edmund had said. So, the problem here is capacity. Keep in mind, you know, what I see a lot of officials and analysts do when it comes to the threat of al-Qaeda from Afghanistan or any other place is they make the assumption while al-Qaeda isn't long – hasn't launched an attack from there today, or probably won't be able to do it next week or next month. To me, it's that capacity building that is the real threat.

Al-Qaeda, you know, from its founding in the early 1990s, up until 9/11, built that capacity over time. We had, you know, the terror attacks in 1998, in Kenya and Tanzania, and U.S. – you know, U.S. officials – were assured by the Taliban that al-Qaeda would be restrained.

And then we had the US Cole – USS Cole – and we had the 9/11. Those attacks took, you know, were planned and executed over the span of a decade. It was the – it was in the making. But yet officials want to look at the short term and the, you know, today and be able to assess this threat. This – my concerns are long term midterm and long-term building that capacity. So, and trusting the Taliban in order to keep restrictions on al-Qaeda. I agree, that it is in the Taliban interests for al-Qaeda not to plot external attacks from Afghanistan, it's also in al-Qaeda's interest for the Taliban to maintain its Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They're both in my estimation, in agreement that it is wise, and it is there – my biggest concern is what I see here is strategic thinking from both the Taliban and al-Qaeda. It allows the Taliban to stay in rule, it allows al-Qaeda continue to run these camps and to train and it gives it safe haven for its leadership. It gives us the ability to – regroup. And this to me is the real threat. We can't just play this way.

And as far as the assessments when, you know, recently, as you had noted, President Biden said that al-Qaeda was done, but the Taliban, he intimated that the Taliban did our bidding and eliminated al-Qaeda, nothing could be further from the truth. If this is the information that he's getting from our intelligence services or the information that is being filtered up from the intelligence services, then we have a very, very big problem in our ability to assess our enemies. How did we lose Afghanistan? Yes, listen, I agree with Kathy, there's a lot of problems with the Afghan government. Corruption is a big problem. But in the end, the United States failed to understand the Taliban, failed to understand its ideological fervor of its commitment to supporting foreign terrorist groups. Its deep cooperation with these groups. And if we now believe that the Taliban is the guarantor of our security, we are making a massive, massive error. And you know, it may not come back to bite us next month or even next year.

But I can – I don't want to give our enemies, I don't want to give al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups time, space, and resources to plot their next attack against either here in the homeland, against U.S. interests or against our allies or – or within the region. It's – this is a very dangerous stage, if we consider the Taliban to be our ally in this effort. And this, this is largely, you know, we think that the Taliban could be an effective counterterrorism partner because of their opposition to the Islamic State. But that's only because the Islamic State and Taliban are mortal enemies. But the Islamic State wants the Taliban to swear allegiance to its Emir. And the Taliban wants the primacy of governance inside of Afghanistan. And that is the conflict between those. If the US didn't support the Taliban one iota, those two would still fight it out. And then at this stage in the game, the Taliban holds all the cards holds all the advantages.

So, we don't need to ally with the Taliban for it to fight with the Islamic State. But if we think that the Taliban is going to fight, if it's going to suppress al-Qaeda, we are making a monumental mistake.

DE LUCE: Kathy, how has your time on the ground informed your perspective on the Taliban's relationship with al-Qaeda and some of these other extremist groups? And how do they see them as perhaps ideological allies or merely just a practical partners for practical purpose? And how is that dynamic playing out now that the US is gone?

GANNON: Yeah, I think the whole militancy picture in Afghanistan is a very complicated one. There has certainly been a number of militant groups. I think at one point, they said, I don't know a smaller and larger ones that were, you know, dozens. And now – that included during the time that the US was there. And with the – those in the government, you had the BLA, the Baloch Liberation Army, had a headquarters in Kandahar. Hamid Karzai, you know, talk to him about it, you know, it was – it was well known that they had the Baloch Liberation Army blew himself up building a suicide bomb in – in southern Kandahar to use in – in Pakistan. That was during the government's – the – when the Republic was there, when the US was there and NATO.

So, it's very complicated. A lot of these militants that are there have been there either for years, they have allegiance. Yes, they've sworn allegiance to the Taliban. Many, many, if not all, were there before the Taliban even came to power. They were there during the previous government with that was allied to the US. The training camps were all there. Ideologically Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Jalaluddin Haqqani who's now dead and take the Arabs, Sirajuddin Haqqani, probably have a greater allegiance or not allegiance, but ideological marriage with the – with al-Qaeda.

If I can also say that further complicated, in 1994, the Massoud's government – professor Professor Rabbani's – government gave Afghan citizenship to 880 Arabs in Afghanistan. So, when the Taliban say, "well, there are no foreign militants," a lot of them were given Afghan citizenship by those the US then allied with in 2001, post-Taliban. So, the militancy issue is a very complicated one. You're absolutely right. When you say that and there is close a relationship.

Are they dependent on one another? I think al-Qaeda certainly is more dependent on the Taliban, the Taliban, certainly in terms of their staying power. I don't think is that dependent on al-Qaeda? I think that the TTP, the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan have a basis there. Some of them are allied with portions within the Taliban, some are not allied within portions within the Taliban.

So, what I want to say that to look at Afghanistan as particularly dangerous, just because the Taliban are there, and that they alone are the providers and ideological partners of these people is a mistake. It's a much more complicated picture. And if there's a real interest in, in getting beyond just the Taliban are liars, they're this or that, and trying to really understand the fabric of the militancy within Afghanistan, within Pakistan, how they're related, how far they go back to whom they're related, maybe would be more of an ability to move forward in the future.

So, do I see them having a relationship with Al-Qaeda? When the Taliban first took power in 1996, they had no allegiance to al-Qaeda. And al-Qaeda was fighting with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (inaudible), and they were fighting with Sayyaf against the Taliban. The Taliban then brought all the Arabs to Kandahar post 1996-1997 when the first time in power. The Kandaharies during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, southern Afghanistan very rarely liked to have the Arabs, they took their money, but they didn't really like to have the Arab militants among them. That was in the east of Afghanistan, where Jalaluddin Haqqani was a very close ally of the CIA and former CIA guy when I was going back to Afghanistan post 2001. He said, "you know, if you see Jalaluddin Haqqani, tell him I said, hi. He's a really good guy."

Now his son, of course is very close with al-Qaeda's so was Jalaluddin Haqqani. When the Taliban fled in 2001 Jalaluddin Haqqani was given the mandate to take all the Arabs out of Kabul, get them into a safety. So that's more in the east. So are they dependent on each other Taliban – al-Qaeda probably be more, Taliban don't really need them. In the Afghan papers that Whitlock – Craig Whitlock – put together, wrote in 2018, or 2020, I can't remember, very clearly said, mistake at the beginning was conflating Taliban and al-Qaeda. And not to say that there isn't relationship, but it was conflating them in going seeing them as both. Also mistake getting in the middle of the civil war. That was another bit of an error there. And that's, that's my take on it.

DE LUCE: That's, that's fascinating. I wanted to pull back for a minute and look at if we could at the wider global perspective. And Edmund, I'd like maybe for you to help us start with that. You know, what – are Russia or China or the US doing? How are they navigating and engaging – or not – with the new rulers of Afghanistan?

FITTON-BROWN: Yeah, thanks, Dan. I touched upon this when I mentioned the absence of good options in Afghanistan. I think, in a way I'm saying, in a way what I'm saying is a sort of a flip side of the same coin that Kathy is referring to. This is a complicated situation, and there are no good options. The question is, you know, what – have you – how do you make incremental progress and what are the least bad options? Now, it's not just the US, NATO and the West that find Afghanistan perplexing, having invested 20 years of blood and treasure, only to find that we're pretty much back where we started, where we started with the Taliban in power.

Russia is also aware of its own recent failure in Afghanistan, and it remains cautious in that arena, at least. China has global ambitions and Afghanistan, besides the mineral wealth that China covets, potentially fits with its Belt and Road Initiative. But China is cautious about its ability to secure its interests in and around Afghanistan, and is aware of the Taliban's relationship with Uyghur extremists in Afghanistan.

The US, China, and Russia are all concerned about the incubation of extremist groups in Afghanistan, and the potential future terrorist threat that could emerge from them. But none of those countries feels immediately directly

threatened. And therefore, CT [counter terrorism] is not driving policy in DC, in Beijing or in Moscow. All share a broader strategic interest in stabilization of Afghanistan, and its immediate neighborhood, and lack any clear idea of how to achieve that. And this helps to explain why the UN Security Council deliberations on Afghanistan have remained consensual and constructive, despite tensions that have made agreement impossible on many other issues, especially since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine last year.

The UN Security Council has not been able to develop a new approach to Afghanistan since 2021. But it has successfully passed rollover resolutions to prevent crisis at the expiry of various Afghan related mandates. Now, I'm a little concerned that the tendency of some outsiders to play up the threat from ISIL Khorasan, it is a threat. And it has the potential to grow into a bigger one. But Bill, I think nailed this when he talked about the disparity in the size and capability between ISIL-K and the Taliban. And sometimes the ISIL-K threat is used as an excuse for other policies, in some cases or reason to engage with the Taliban on counterterrorism. And I agree with Bill that that is not a good idea. And of course, we could expand on that later, perhaps if there's interest, but I don't want to get into that go down that rabbit hole just yet.

In other cases, inflated estimates that ISIL-K's manpower and capability are used to frightened smaller countries, to make them more welcoming of protection from others.

Lastly, I'll say in response to your question that in some ways, the most interesting question is not how the US, China, and Russia and navigating the Afghan challenge. But how Pakistan and India; Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; Turkmenistan and Iran are navigating it.

Now the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, so how the Shanghai Cooperation Organization relates to the challenges of Afghanistan. And of course, this then links back into those wider great power strategic interests that concern China, Russia, and indeed the United States.

DE LUCE: That was a very good, very good portrait painted there. Bill, do you want to maybe join in and discuss, in part, not only what Edmund was talking about, but there is obviously this dilemma for Washington. The US, of course, does not recognize and has no formal diplomatic relations with the Taliban. But there is this tremendous humanitarian crisis unfolding there, kind of an economic freefall, and the US and other countries are providing humanitarian aid through the UN trying to get money to Afghans but without having to send the money directly to the – to the Taliban regime, but nevertheless, obviously some of the money presumably might end up in the Taliban's hands. Are you – what – what are you – how do you see all of that playing out and – and is – that – that's a pretty brutal choice, isn't it? It's recognizing the Taliban and legitimizing it somehow versus, you know, letting people starve.

ROGGIO: Yeah, well first off, I would like to add some – what Edmund said but I – I think I'll – I'll pass. He – he summed this up nicely. I mean, there's a lot to add with Pakistan. I – I will briefly mention this – the Pakistanis – look, they supported the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan for reasons of strategic depth, and it suffered from the – movement of the Taliban in Pakistan or Tehrik-eTaliban Pakistan, a violent insurgency that was – killed estimated tens of thousands of Pakistanis. I've heard over 100,000. I don't think we really know the number. And yet the – Pakistanis understood that the Afghan Taliban supported the Pakistani Taliban and look past this.

Now that we see hundreds of Pakistanis who are being killed in this renewed violence, if the Pakistani government didn't end its support for the Afghan Taliban back then, I see little reason for it to do so now. It's a cost that – the very cynical government that does not think of its people, does not think of its soldiers and policemen on the front line.

And so this is – this is a very big concern that – if we think that Pakistan can rein in the Afghan Taliban, it wasn't willing to do so years ago and I don't see that it will be now that this strategic depth that Pakistan seeks is due – oppose its real – what it believes will be its real enemy in the region, which is India.

As far as the funding of the Taliban, billions and billions of dollars in U.S. aid has flowed into the hands of – or into Afghanistan since the U.S. withdrawal. And Dan, you said it very well – this is an extremely difficult and I think a really hard choice that the US has to make and the international community.

The Taliban is skimming large portions of this aid to fund itself, which in turn allows the Taliban government to persist, to survive, and to thrive, and which allows various terrorist groups to operate training camps on its territory.

So we are – in – in ways, we are funding our enemies, then it – you know, in my estimation, we have to view the Taliban as a terrorist regime. Sirajuddin Haqqani is especially designated global terrorist, his Haqqani network is as well. He is the – one of two deputy emirs of the Taliban, as well as Edmund noted, the Minister of the Interior, which is issuing passports and ID cards and – the UN report also notes this – to the – to members of al-Qaeda and their families.

We are – I – I feel for the Afghan people and – and we should be doing everything that we can to ensure they're receiving medicine and they're not starving, but if it's done in a manner that funds the Taliban and allows it to provide support and safe haven for terrorist groups, we just can't do it.

Our opportunity to help the Afghan people ended on August 15th, 2001, when Kabul fell, and two weeks later, when the US withdrew its last soldier from Afghanistan. If we think that we can influence the Taliban, we believe that the Taliban is going to moderate and have an inclusive government and that it actually cares about the people that live under its harsh rule, we're mistaken.

And, you know, asking U.S. taxpayers to foot the bill for – for a Taliban government that supports terrorist organizations, it's – it's wrong on so many levels, for security reasons, for moral reasons. I – you know, it's hard for me to say this but I will tell you this – many Afghans who I've spoken to agree with this, that US aid should not be flowing through the Taliban because it is merely propping up the Taliban regime.

DE LUCE: Kathy, I imagine you might have some – some viewpoint on this. And also, could I ask you specifically on Pakistan, given your experience there – Pakistan was the source of so much frustration in Washington throughout the – the U.S. military presence there. The US is now gone. How is the – is the exit of the US and the Taliban takeover being – received in – in Pakistan? How is it – affecting Pakistan and how is Pakistan influencing events in Afghanistan?

GANNON: Sure. Thank you very much. Yes, I would like to address a few of those comments. First, the – to make sweeping statements that the money is being siphoned off without, you know, specifics, and – to not be in the country, it's not about recognizing the Taliban. The Taliban is the government. It's the de facto government because it controls the area.

But it's about diplomatic relations and how do you – to measure them out, how do you – how do you do it and still be in-country. Afghanistan is a country of 38 million people. It's not the elite in Kabul and it's not the expats that everybody speaks to.

And to try to understand the larger country and what the – Afghans really are looking for and need, it – really is important to have more people in-country. Whether they’re siphoning off all of the – the money that’s going in, I – don’t know where that evidence is. The – Taliban also – and I’m not saying they’re not, I’m just saying that they’re – where is the evidence?

Also – I’m – I’m also questioning if – you take away all the assistance to – to Afghans, 38 million people, how are they surviving? Before you left, there – the – the – 80 percent of all the money of – of – that was available for anything – healthcare, everything – came from outside. Now you want to take it away because you think it’s all going to the Taliban?

So I’m – I think there’s a real difficult dilemma and I – I think it has to go beyond these sweeping, you know, “the Taliban are stealing all the money, it’s better not to give any aid.” For five years when the Taliban were last in power, between ‘96 – and 2001, they were sanctioned, there was no money coming in, they banned drugs. They weren’t in danger of being militarily overthrown despite all of that. So I think there has to be some deeper thinking on – on this and how to get beyond that.

On the Pakistani front, let me say yes, post-Taliban takeover, the TTP [Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan] have – have increased their – attacks. The – it’s destabilized the border areas. The – relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban, there’s been innumerable battles along the border. Pakistan has put in – put in a fence. The previous government rejected it, the Taliban reject it. Pakistan got itself into a real difficult situation. Having supported the – these – militant groups and then trying to control these military groups are two very different things.

So right now in Pakistan, you say the government doesn’t care about its people, the government doesn’t care about its soldiers, doesn’t care about – I don’t think that’s fair. I – I mean, I think – I think the – and – the military, to be clear, makes the decisions on Afghanistan mostly – so – and they do care about their soldiers. How they see fighting their – who they see as their enemy, which is India, is a different thing. Now – now, they have their security concerns, Afghanistan has its security concerns, America has its security concerns.

And I just want to say that – that there is a – a huge problem now, in terms of – of the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan has gone in and it – it bombed the – border areas, killing 42 people, because they were attacked.

So they went – cross-border attacks, and that makes the whole situation very volatile, also for India because it – also wants to have some relationship, and – both countries, Pakistan and India, both have issues with each other. ISI [Inter State Intelligence] plays – plays silly (games, so does the Indian intelligence.

And so I just think, again, to try to oversimplify and put on any one person, country’s head all the responsibility does nothing for anybody in terms of moving things forward and making life a little bit better for Afghans, 38 million of whom are inside the country and trying to figure out how to move forward.

And I – yeah, so I don’t know if that answered your question but there you go.

DE LUCE: And – no, you – you – you covered a – a lot – many points there. Thank you. I should just point out, I think just for this conversation, for context, what the World Food Program has said about the situation in Afghanistan.

It says the humanitarian crisis of incredible proportions has grown even more complex and severe since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Job losses, lack of cash, and soaring prices are creating a new class of hungry in Afghanistan. 15.3 million Afghans are not consuming enough food. It says acute malnutrition is above emergency thresholds – in 25 out of 34 provinces.

And then of course you have a debate going on now among development aid groups and human rights groups about how – what the US, what the West should do. It is this kind of Hobbesian choice, and you have Human Rights Watch saying that the US should ease some of these restrictions on banking that would allow more aid to flow, cause as you know, the US and other governments in the World Bank group revoked the credentials of the Central Bank in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover.

GANNON: Yeah.

DE LUCE: Well, I want to keep moving on here. Bill and Edmund, do you have anything else you want to add for the moment or can we go to the question and answer session from the audience?

ROGGIO: I – I just want to add one quick thing. Kathy asked about where the evidence is. The – the Special Investigator General for Afghan Reconstruction noted recently that the Taliban is siphoning off money – you know, the – he explained how he testified...

(CROSSTALK)

GANNON: ... no – no, Bill, I – I – no, I listened to that, and – and – and what he said is – is that – and – and his explanation was (inaudible) if you look on TV, you see a (inaudible). So where's the money going to – and a lot of poor Afghans. He didn't give evidence. So I – I just want to say – and – thank you for that – but I just want to say, cause I listened to his entire presentation to the – to the Senate – I think it was the Senate committee – and he did not give evidence of the – specifics of any siphoning. He just said "well, you know, we – we – we believe that they will be because look at – you know, they're not suffering, that the people are suffering."

So no, I think – I think there has to be – and I'm not saying that they're not but I'm just saying there has to be a real strong – and systematic look at things, not demonizing them and – putting them so that everything that can be said wrong, you can say it and nobody questions it because then you're – risk – you have the risk of saying "well, so you – you support them."

Of course not, but all I'm saying is that if you don't look at things clearly and with – evidence-based and – try to take a larger look instead of just, well, you know, "what else would they do? You know, the – people are starving and they're not," then they must be siphoning it off. I – just think it's – it – the – that's just my point.

DE LUCE: So just for the record, there was a report that was commissioned by USAID, and it – that report said the Taliban, quote, "appear to view the UN system as yet another revenue stream, one which their movement will seek to monopolize and centralize control over." That's what that report said, but of course there were some pretty severe accusations against the previous Afghan government.

So now we will go to questions that have come in, if – if you can bear with me. One of the questions was – why don't I – I give this to anyone who will take it but we'll start with Edmund. One question was "with the U.S. military and

Western militaries departed from Afghanistan, how can the US and others gain an – accurate picture of what’s going on and – particularly when it comes to these extremist or terrorist elements?”

FITTON-BROWN: Yeah, um well be obviously less – less well, less easily than was the case when you had the presence in-country. You know, the – concept of an over-the-horizon CT capability is not a completely empty one but it’s a flawed one.

In talking to experts, you know, people who have been engaged in – in – in this kind of kinetic CT, you – you lose two things. You lose tempo, you can’t maintain any kind of tempo of – taking out terrorist leaders, and you also lose accuracy and you’re much more likely to make mistakes and – and also to kill – you know, to – to incur collateral civilian damage.

So – and I think it – you know, we shouldn’t forget that the United States and indeed some other countries have very significant knowledge of what’s happening in Afghanistan, even in present circumstances. They have extremely developed intelligence capabilities, which enable them to have a very detailed, nuanced picture of what’s – happening.

But I – you know, and I – see that – I see the satisfaction that – that we’ll have yielded in the case of the Zawahiri operation. It was a sort of a – some people took it as proof that you could do this, thing– even though you weren’t in-country, but the problem is that you can’t sustain it and you’re likely to make mistakes. And so it’s a much blunter instrument.

DE LUCE: Excellent summary. Bill, do you have anything to add to that?

ROGGIO: Yeah, just really quickly – and –in December, I believe it was of 2021, General McKenzie said that U.S. ability to see inside Afghanistan, U.S. intelligence capabilities, was reduced from one to two percent of what it was when the US was present in Afghanistan.

And I always go back to a – you know, U.S. assessments in Afghanistan about al-Qaeda strength for example were deeply flawed. For six straight years, nearly there was an estimate that Al-Qaeda had 50 to 100 fighters and operatives in the – and leaders within the country, and that was all shattered when the U.S. conducted a raid on an al-Qaeda training camp in Shorabak in Kandahar in October of 2015. So al-Qaeda was – and this was a camp that a – a general said was the largest training camp they had seen since 9/11, not just in Afghanistan but in the world. Was – that was at least the – the – the – how he had stated it. Whether that’s true or not, that’s what he said. And upwards of 200 al-Qaeda fighters and operatives were killed.

There are actually two camps, and al-Qaeda was running a – media operations. They didn’t find out about the existence of this camp until they – until a couple months prior, when they conducted a raid in eastern Afghanistan.

So I use this as an example of how things are happening and what we didn’t know about what was happening in Afghanistan while we were there. If we think it’s getting – our intelligence is getting better and we’re more effective now that we’re not there, well, we – should seriously reconsider that.

DE LUCE: What about – we talk – we talked a little bit about China but I’d like to come back to that, and – Russia if that’s – if we have time, because there was a lot of talk about Afghanistan’s tremendous mineral wealth, and lithium in particular.– And when the US was still there, this was considered a great, promising future for the country over the long run. It –was referred to as the – the Saudi Arabia of lithium.

It – it – is this now going to be basically in – exploited by the Chinese government, as part of its kind of global Belt and Road efforts? What – is the status of lithium in China and how China wants to operate in – in Afghanistan? It – Kathy or Edmund, you – you – who wants to take that?

GANNON: It – I’m – I’m – I’ll defer to Edmund after but I – can I just say yes, China is involved and China would like to very much exploit that.

To be clear, any country or company would want to exploit it. It’s financially a good business. So anybody’s going to want to exploit it. Is China in there doing it? Yes. The – but China is also, as Bill so rightly said and Edmund so rightly said, nervous about the Taliban and – and about their Uyghur resistance movement. And so they are also talking with the Taliban about that, and that’s really their main concern.

Will they – will they try to exploit it? Absolutely. But to be clear, anyone else would try to exploit it too if they could to make money.

So anyway, I’ll – I’ll defer to Edmund, who – who probably has much – much more detail than – explanation.

FITTON-BROWN: I – I mean, like, you know, not much in the way of detail but I’ve been really able to endorse what Kathy just said. I completely agree with that. And I think this is – you know, one of the key things I do want to get across before this webinar finishes is we’ve got to stop thinking in terms of a zero sum game between the West and the – you know, the neighbors.

China is one of the neighbors, and yeah, China has economic interests in Afghanistan, and it has signed agreements which give it some rights over – over Afghan minerals. And yes, Afghanistan does have a good deal of potential mineral wealth, not just lithium, but if we ever want to get out of this nightmare in Afghanistan, the only way out is a sort of a neighborhood-led stabilization and future prosperity approach.

In other words, we want – China and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and Pakistan and the others, we want them to succeed because the only people who have real leverage on the Taliban are the people directly across the border who have no choice but to engage with them, and if that can be changed from a – relationship of conflict – suspicion over time into something more like mutual dependency and a – common increase in prosperity, that might hold the seeds of some kind of future for the Afghan people.

It won’t be easy to get there but I think we have to stop saying oh, you know, “China’s a threat in Afghanistan.” I think that’s a mistaken view.

GANNON: And – and if I could just jump in – oh, sorry – if I could just jump in just really quickly because I – agree so much with Edmund, and that’s why I think if it is going to move forward, there has to be a way to – find a way to not demonize your – the – government that it is.

That doesn’t say to accept it, that doesn’t say to – but it does say that if you want to move forward, there has to be some interaction, there has to be some understanding of the on-the-ground realities by being on the ground and being – talking to people in a larger area beyond Kabul, beyond the cities, into the – to get a real feel.

If I could say what – in terms of intelligence, it – the greatest source of intelligence are the people, but most Afghans don't trust the US anymore, most people don't trust the West in Afghanistan anymore.

And there was a book in 2018 about the Taliban narratives and – who won, who lost, and US and NATO clearly lost, and – a lot of that, I think, you have to understand where the people are also coming from and what their thinking is about what the West intentions are, what the U.S. intentions, and how that allows the Taliban to gain further grip on – the people and – how you need to understand that to be able to counter their narrative and to be able to – address what the people in Afghanistan are saying, and – the Taliban have mastered that – propaganda campaign and the West and – NATO in that, they completely failed that – at – to try to reach out to the people so that you can counter their narrative and – and if – be – giving the Taliban strength to be able to – to push against the West and what the West intentions are and – they spent 20 years making the West look like they were – they were – the night raids, the killing of people, and there was. There were a lot of people – thousands were taken away in the first years of – of post-2001 and put in Bagram just because they happened to be in – in – they happened to be in Kandahar, in – you know, there was a lot of – and people taking to dark sites and people, you know – so there's a lot of suspicion among ordinary Afghans, and that allows the Taliban to gain a further grip and to – maximize their propaganda ability.

And the – to – move forward there, you – you – if you understand better all of this, maybe there's a way to counter the narrative, to win over the hearts and minds of people, which –, over 20 years, was impossible.

And anyway, that's – that's the last I'll say.

DE LUCE: I was going to give all of you a – a chance to give your concluding remarks. I feel like maybe you just did but you can – you could – you get – I'll give you another chance. But Bill, maybe I'll give you a – a – the final word here, – and then Edmund, you can – you also kind of had some interesting overarching remarks but maybe you can chime in as well.

What is – excuse the vague overarching question here but what is the way forward for the US and its partners with Afghanistan? Edmund talked about a – not a lot of great options and one has to be realistic and that maybe the best way forward is through the neighboring countries. Bill, what do you say to that?

ROGGIO: Yeah, well, first, again, thank you everyone for joining us. The – the – this was an excellent discussion, one that I'm really happy to have had. I do agree with Edmund and Kathy – we do need to figure out ways to work out with – work with partners in the region, with the neighbors, and that does include China.

You know, I think one of the biggest mistakes – not one of the biggest but it – it – one of – one of the many mistakes we made was not getting some buy-in from China. It did have a legitimate concern about the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and – and, you know, very – so, you know, by shutting out – but, you know, there were problems as well, such as putting too much trust in – with Pakistan, as the Pakistani military and intelligence services backed the Taliban as they took our money.

So we have to be care – like, we – the partners are important. Iran will never be a partner, and it does play an influential role within Afghanistan, but the acrimony between the US and – and Iran, I – just could never see that, but somehow, we do need to get – be – because the US is not going to send troops back into Afghanistan. That will not happen. So we need the – a – a policy of somehow containing this problem.

I don't think there's a way of weaning al-Qaeda off from the Taliban. I do agree with Kathy that the – these are complicated issues but some of these issues are not very complicated. That al-Qaeda-Taliban alliance is very strong. We do need to be prepared to strike at al-Qaeda when the time is right, if we detect threats emanating from that region, but again, this really – that's often reactionary.

I – honestly, looking at this for the last two years, trying to think of solutions, I don't have one solution. I think one of the things we really need to do is figure out how we lost Afghanistan, what are the mistake – until we understand the mistakes that we made, recognize them and talk about them in an honest way and not deal with the politics – “oh, it was Trump's deal that caused the failure,” – “it was Biden's withdrawal.”

It was all of this. It was how the Bush administration assembled a central Afghan government where a president appoints district leaders. Think about that. That would be like the – or the President of the United States appointing your local county commissioner. Like, these are problems – you know, we didn't understand the Afghan culture, we didn't understand our so-called allies.

Until we've recognized all of these mistakes that we made and figure out how to move forward, I find it very difficult for us to think that we could manage this problem today and come up with a solution that involves complex actors, such as Pakistan that has very real stakes within Afghanistan, that views it as strategic depth against India.

You know, I mean, I – I think part of the Pakistan problem is hoping that the people of Pakistan could truly elect a representative government, one that isn't beholden to the military. How do you break that problem? That isn't a problem that the United States can nor should try to solve on its own.

So, you know, I realize there's not very many solutions in what I'm talking about here, but to me, until you understand the problem, the problems and the nature – you know, how we got here, we're never going to come up with a very real solution.

And – and I think, politically here in the United States, there's so much – the – this is – this and other issues are so politically charged that neither side really wants to get to the root of this problem. And the Afghan people suffer for that, American national security suffers for that, we all suffer for it, and that – that is the real shame.

DE LUCE: Thank you, Bill. I think we're running out of time now, so I will say thank you to all of those who tuned in today, thank you to all of our panelists for your time. It was an excellent discussion. Kathy, we look forward to hearing your insights in the future. Edmund, also looking forward to hearing your perspective in the future about this part of the world. And I encourage you to catch Bill's podcast, “Generation Jihad”, published by FDD's *Long War Journal*.

Thank you again.

GANNON: Thank you very much.

FITTON-BROWN: Thank you very much. A pleasure.

ROGGIO: Thank you.

END