



Transcript Q&A

Is Peaceful Political Transition in Afghanistan Possible?

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Michael Keating:

There's three things that I think embrace what you've all said. First that the withdrawal of the international military actually is creating opportunities as well as risks and perils. Secondly, I think you've either said it explicitly or implicitly, that a medium- to long-term approach is required: that if we set ourselves up to try and sort everything out immediately, it's not going to work, but if you take a longer-term approach and pace ourselves then things might be possible. Thirdly, we need to be clear about our objectives, and sometimes the clarity of those objectives is missing. So I don't know whether that helps us answer the central question. So let me take some points or questions from the floor.

Question 1:

To what extent have drones been effective or counterproductive in reducing the capability of the Taliban, and indeed what remains of Al-Qaida; and secondly, to what extent are drugs fuelling corruption in the existing government and how may that be resolved?

Question 2:

I have read Mullah Zaeef, former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan's book, *My Life with the Taliban*. He was shipped to Guantanamo by the Yanks and he was abysmally treated and tortured, and is now living in retirement in Kabul and still refusing to have anything to do with the new regime. But this leads me on... in his book there's a constant sense of grievance which is rooted actually in some theological issues. And here I come to a point made by Matt Waldman, where he has mentioned the word jihad. It is a word often bandied about, but it does so allude to the theological dimension in the conflict, and I wonder if we could have a comment, how important it is.

Question 3:

In your excellent presentations, one thing that I was surprised you didn't mention was the tribal makeup of Afghanistan: the traditional hostility between Tajiks and Pashtuns, the dominance of the Mohammadzai tribe in the previous days. I think most of you – except for Robert Johnson who suggested that maybe on the security side the government may have to sup with the devil and do deals – it seemed to me that all of you were pointing towards a strong central government with strong funding that was going to be

able to govern the country. But is that really the solution? Do you think there's a possibility that a less centralized government, more based on tribal loyalties, might win the day?

There was also the suggestion that the real things that concern Afghans are the security around themselves. Most of life in Afghanistan is about water: whether it's going to snow and rain enough to fill the rivers and aquifers to irrigate the land, grow the trees, they're going to keep warm and cook their food with, and if you can solve some of those problems with regional solutions – if you live in Fayzabad, what's going on in Kabul is really of no interest to you at all.

Question 4:

I wonder if you could briefly address the question of the Haqqani network. They are obviously... in terms of some kind of autonomous reconciliation, then they're actually quite well placed, as the Pakistanis say, to police southeast Afghanistan. The two problems with them are of course one, as you know, the Americans are not and cannot talk to them, and secondly the fact that Al-Qaida is so closely associated with them. How do you think that's going to be managed into the overall reconciliation?

Michael Keating:

Matt, do you want to answer that question about that one, and possibly the theological dimension? Rob, drones? I don't know if you want to take on the drugs and corruption one, or Jawed you may want to try that as well, and the tribal makeup of Afghanistan, and are we missing a reality here that needs to be part of the solution. I think the point about water and security is extremely well taken.

Matt Waldman:

Yes, just a few remarks. There are certainly people in this room better qualified to answer some of these questions than I am, but I would say yes, there is a theological dimension to the insurgency. I spent about a year interviewing Taliban commanders, and really in every case religion featured quite strongly. Of course, what they will say is that they want sharia, and for them that is panoptic. It is a concept that embraces many different aspects of life and of the state. So it certainly has that dimension, and, of course, when one considers the role of madrasas, both inside Afghanistan and Pakistan,

there's no doubt that many of the young men who are fighting and dying on the side of the Taliban have a degree of religious conviction and motivation.

But that doesn't mean to say that there aren't other factors that influence their decision to fight. And many – if you talk at great length – will talk about a society that is just trying to root out corruption and to ensure sovereignty: to rid their country of what they see as invaders. Now they may be wrong about that, but that is the way they see it, and many of them do believe that international forces have propped up a corrupt and abusive regime, and that has been absolutely part of, I think, the narrative of the Taliban and one of the driving forces.

As to the Haqqani network, I think it was reported by the press that the United States had engaged with people who were either in the Haqqani network or connected to it, and so it may be that the Haqqanis can feature in some way in the process of dialogue moving forward. It's interesting to see what they say publicly, which is that they fall within the Taliban movement and they owe allegiance to Mullah Omar, so on the face of it those individuals who have been authorized by the leadership council of the Taliban to speak on its behalf should also be representing them. Now of course we know the Haqqanis are somewhat autonomous within the Taliban, but I think there are many elements within the Taliban that a degree of autonomy – inevitably that's going to be a challenge moving forward, given that it is a heavily networked movement.

Dr Robert Johnson:

You've asked me specifically to answer – I'd love to give an answer to all of these questions but I can't – but very quickly on drones: this has become this cause célèbre at the moment because of the questionability of the ethical use of them, or the legality of using them outside of a combat zone within the territorial space of Afghanistan. Largely the debates rage about their use in the sovereign space of Pakistan, and that's where people get very angry about this particular issue. From a purely military perspective – purely military – they are devastatingly effective. They combine mobility with precision and all those sorts of things. Where they are used intelligently, and I use that word advisedly, they have been devastatingly effective against the command structure, or the *mahez* [sic], the front commanders of the Taliban. What's been interesting is that as we've found with air power in the 1940s and 1950s, where it's not combined with other military means, it becomes less effective because without following these things up, or seeking to replace these

leaders with some sort of negotiation, what you do is you allow your adversary – if you want – to regenerate that command structure, and that's what happens.

So over the last few years, high-value targeting has been extraordinarily effective, but it's merely meant a new generation of leadership comes forward and replaces the people that have been doing the fighting. That has created its own form of instability, or radicalism if you like, among some of them. But it has... over a period of time for example it has forced the Taliban front commanders – many of them, those who are responsible for large areas – to actually withdraw from Afghanistan altogether and to operate from within Pakistan, which has made it less able for them to do the sort of thing that Matt's talking about, the command and control at the local level, creating distance between them and the population. So an interesting kind of thing.

I'd love to answer that question about jihad in a sense, because it is about struggling to live out your faith, and if the emphasis was about struggling to live out your faith rather than conducting *ghaza* [*sic*] – holy war – then I think we might be on an interesting theological discussion about how one goes through that. What I find disappointing about Mullah Zaeef is that so much of that work is a rant, rather than actually being a constructive basis of dialogue, but that's just a personal opinion.

The one I really would like to answer is the question about localism. I think you're absolutely right. I think the difficulty we face at the moment is that – and this may well be true of the last 20–30 years for western forces and western governments, dealing with the global south, if we use that term – which is that we've brought models of the state, which are bureaucratic, and tried to interpret the world... polities which are clan-based, very ancient, plural, multi-polarity in terms of forms of sources of power, very much contested. We've tried to bring our bureaucratic models of the state into that space and we've been surprised when they don't match up. We've therefore misunderstood – this is what I mean about clear objectives – we've misunderstood quite the species, if you like, we're dealing with. And I think if we were to do that, that would be a great step forward.

I would only add this note of caution; I think it's a very important note of caution. It is I think there's a certain romantic stream of thinking that suggests that somehow if we were able to embrace the *khom* [*sic*], the clans, or tribalism, somehow we could resurrect something which has long disappeared. Sir Roger Braithwaite's fantastic book on the Soviet war in Afghanistan, what's so powerful about that period is that it destroyed so much

of the traditional fabric of social relations in Afghanistan. Men with guns replaced the old *maliks* and the old *khans* [*sic*], and older people in Afghanistan look back with nostalgia at that era where there was some sort of social structures and hierarchies which people could work within and work to. That's gone. That has simply gone.

And the irony, of course, for the mujahedeen and now for the Taliban is that they may be very good at tactical fighting, even at the local level, but they've squandered the strategic opportunity. They've actually destroyed the very world that they're fighting to preserve. That's the great irony, the great paradox. Which is why any short-term solution – re-iterating this – any short-term solution is not something we should be looking at: we should be looking longer-term, we should think beyond the horizon. It's a case of showing how this ends 30 years from now, and we work towards that objective, rather than it being trying to go back to the past or indeed trying to manipulate some sort of bureaucratic state model, but I think you're absolutely right. You put it very well.

Jawed Nader:

I think John raised an important point. After 2001, the issue of localism, or tribalism, has become even more pertinent, I would say. In the last parliamentary election when they were choosing their speaker, there was a dead end for 45 days. If a Pashtun wanted to nominate himself, Tajik and Hazara MPs wouldn't vote for him, and the same case continued for 45 days until a committee decided that none of the major tribes: Pashtun, Hazaras, and Tajiks should nominate. And then a Tajik nominated himself as the speaker and he got an overwhelming majority. He is Abdul Ibrahimi, the current speaker in the parliament.

It also has implications for aid and development. Some of the programmes that are highly successful in Afghanistan, including the National Solidarity Programme and the basic health package, they are because they're not centralized, because the decisions are made at the provincial level. I think the legacy of our bureaucracy is mostly from the times of monarchy in a very centralized communist system, and we have not been able to overcome that. If aid has to be effective, it has to look at the needs of people in the local level.

Question 5:

Matt Waldman, you mentioned Pakistan's fear of being excluded from the negotiations. To what extent is this prompted by Pakistan's fears for its own internal security from the Pakistan Taliban?

Question 6:

I'd like to follow on from the point about water. I noticed General Michael Flynn referred a lot to water security, tactically and strategically. How serious is the water situation in regarding the possibility of some regeneration of the economy through mining development? Because mining projects demand an awful lot of water.

Question 7:

You talked, Jawed, about the National Solidarity Programme, and the need for more national programmes in future; but at the same time we're hearing that there's going to be some kind of fragmentation of power very likely over the next few years when there will be something of a vacuum. What is the implication of the likely political developments for the future direction of aid by the international community? If we're not going to be able to work through a national government to the same extent, what should we be doing?

Question 8:

When interveners pull out, leaving behind a mess that's a result of their policies, they often want to drop that in the lap of the United Nations. The United Nations has been present throughout, deeply compromised by its dependence on ISAF for its own security, and with the special representative and secretary general trying to exert a degree of independence from US policy, but were inevitably very close to US policy. Where does that leave the UN in terms of the needs now of the transition? Can it play the impartial role in mediation or the sort of role in mediation that Matt Waldman talked about?

Question 9:

Is peaceful political transition possible if there's going to be the usual peace/justice trade-off, in which human rights and justice will be sacrificed at the altar of political and military expediency? You already have a weak, fallible government filled with very corrupt, predatory individuals and it seems

you're going to add bad with bad, and there doesn't seem to have been any clean-up of the government system as it stands.

Question 10:

One of our members is asking [via Twitter]: what are the strategies for protecting women from slipping further during transition?

Question 11:

I'd like to ask as per the brief specific questions about specific sectors, the key one being sustainability. What are the prospects for the sustainability of the media sector in Afghanistan, which is often regarded as one of the benchmarks of democracy and a major success for the Karzai government and the country as a whole. When the money dries up, much of the funding for the media will dry up; it's widely regarded as over-inflated but it is still well-known as a lively and a diverse sector, approaching, according to some authoritative sources, the level of Pakistan and India.

The other sector of civil society that I'm particularly interested in is the bureaucracy. I was listening to Radio 4 this morning about a potted history of the British Civil Service, where it was said that it was the principle legacy of the Victorian era. Is there any kind of functioning bureaucracy or civil service-type body that will be left as a legacy of this 11-year involvement in Afghanistan? And sorry to introduce this at a late stage, but the overall sustainability of these two sectors obviously depends on the economic condition of the country, and could you give, just briefly, your idea of the overall prospects for the economy of the nation?

Michael Keating:

Well that is a huge number of questions. I'm going to start with Jawed this time and we're going to have to keep our answers, I'm afraid, incredibly brief. If you can address whatever you think you'd like to address...

Jawed Nader:

I'll be very brief. I think in the future of Afghanistan we need a central government that does more of the coordination of the efforts and not just centralization. We have examples of people who wanted an NGO in Daykundi to do something because the director of MRRD (Ministry of Rural

Rehabilitation and Development) there didn't want that; he simply referred it to the central government and it took that NGO another four months to do the paperwork. So if the problems are in the provinces, the solutions should be there too.

Fortunately, one of the good, effective projects that are being done in Afghanistan at the moment is in the ministry of finance, which is provincial budgeting. That has received very little attention from the donors apart from the World Bank; no one seems to be interested in it, so there are a lot of problems for the local government.

With regards to women in transition, unfortunately there is a big fear that women's rights will be traded with peace. At the moment out of 58 members in the High Peace Council, there are only nine women, and they have a very nominal role to play. The Taliban have expressed that one of the main bones of contention throughout their negotiations will be the rights of women. So the answer to that is that there is very little commitment from the Afghan government to really ensure that Afghan women have their rights, even after the post-political settlement is achieved.

Dr Robert Johnson:

Okay, conscious of time, I'll try and be as brief as I can, although all of these need huge amounts of work and unpacking. On Pakistan, the internal security absolutely is their priority. If you imagine – tragic though it is for every single American family, there have now been I think 2,049 casualties in military operations over the last 10 years in the United States, not to mention the other ISAF countries including our own – Pakistan has lost over 3,000, killed and wounded, every year since 2001 during these current troubles. It's no surprise, therefore, in proportion terms that their primary concern is internal security, which goes back to the point you were making about the Haqqani network. They must be a priority of policy in terms of engagement for the Western powers, and understanding just how much Pakistan has been, to quote the Americans, in the 'hurt locker' over this recent conflict.

On water – how fascinating – climatically, there's been a 20 per cent drop in precipitation over the whole of Central Asia over the last 10 or 15 years, and therefore systems of agriculture which are dependent on rain fall or water systems or snow melt are under pressure, and will continue to be under pressure over the next 10 or 20 years. So water management and water security are pretty important. With that of course food security is going to be the absolute priority of every Afghan family in the rural south.

UN: gosh – you should really be answering this question! ISAF of course, as we know, were commissioned by the United Nations, stood up by the United Nations, so it's very difficult for the United Nations to turn around to the Taliban and say 'we're an honest broker, we're an independent group'. It may be perhaps in the future we just look at the Organization of the Islamic Conference and others to provide some of the lead in getting some more of that negotiation underway.

The Afghan position, as far as I understand it with interviewees, is that Afghanistan regards any future negotiation or role of the United Nations to be one which has to acknowledge Afghanistan as an independent sovereign space, and that therefore it will not accept imposed settlements by any agency. We know a lot about this particular history and we know therefore the UN will need to tread very carefully with that one. It's worth just pointing out that the only form of governance which appears to be resilient as far as many Afghans are concerned – we won't name names here – is the Afghan National Army. And there is a real concern that they will be the broker in the future if we don't get it right in terms of civil society; that has also been mentioned today.

What's really impressive is if you meet young Afghan officers coming out of their training academies who've been working in the field for the last few years, is how determined they are to fight and defend the people of Afghanistan because they are deeply nationalistic, or perhaps patriotic – that's a better word – in that sense and I take my hat off to them, because they have been the ones without leave, without rotations of every six months, and they're the ones who've been in the field fighting for their own country. They're the ones who want that. And it's the insurgents at the moment who want a military victory before they start talking, and that could be the key difference.

Michael Keating:

Matt, justice being sacrificed on the altar of a peace deal?

Matt Waldman:

Yes, I think that this is a danger, there's no question, and there will be very difficult discussions ahead. I think one does have to think about what the alternative is. If we are not moving towards a political settlement at some stage in the future that incorporates the Taliban, I would expect the Taliban to

make significant unilateral gains, especially in the south, the southeast, the east and the west. They are highly effective on the battlefield and I think many Afghans would be apprehensive about that state of affairs.

I think it underscores the importance of having an inclusive process to ensure that many of the different groups within Afghanistan's society have an opportunity to participate in this moving forward. I do think that actually what we don't have is dialogue, a substantive dialogue between the parties to the conflict. Now that is not the same thing as the settlement, and I think it is right to make every effort to get to that point, where we can actually see what it is that the Taliban have to say about the future of Afghanistan. I think that is where our efforts should lie, and a separate question is: is it even feasible to move towards a settlement?

I have just one point on the mediator. I think essentially there are two core criteria for that. One is: is the mediator up to the task of bringing the parties into line, and moving this process forward in an effective and inclusive way? And secondly: is the mediator sufficiently trusted by the parties to the conflict? That will require eliciting their views on who might be a suitable candidate for such a job.

Michael Keating:

Thank you all, now we haven't really answered some of the questions, particularly on the economy. I will just, in 30 seconds, say that Afghanistan's economy is perilously dependent upon the weather, upon agriculture; that the prospects of revenues from mineral exploitation are somewhat distant, and even if that happens there's no guarantee that the revenues will go into state coffers and will bring jobs and other benefits to the population.

In the meantime, agriculture still offers the best prospect. Now whether that can be translated into revenues that sustain the bureaucracy is another matter. One of the other characteristics of Afghanistan is this famous 'second civil service' of 7,000 bureaucrats, either Afghans or international who are paid international salaries, and whether the resources will continue to be available to allow them to work. In every ministry they tend to be the ones doing an awful lot of the heavy lifting.

I think the independence of the media sector is a real concern. It's remarkable, especially compared to the neighbours, how free and riotous the Afghan media space is – it's truly extraordinary. As you know, the BBC just commissioned a rather interesting study, I think it was the BBC Trust or one

of those, on how the independence of the media does depend upon it being championed by organizations which are not politically affiliated – and there isn't a champion out there, so that is a major concern: whether the media will be subjugated to political interests.

I think we really have run out of time, I was just very pleased with the reference to young people. One thing that hasn't come out that is very apparent when you're in Afghanistan is that young people do have a different take on the future, and if I was to grossly simplify, they are more optimistic, they do think transition is possible. One of the strange things about Afghanistan is that it has been dominated by the same group of people for 20 or 30 years. They are still there, the same characters. And at a certain point they are going to have to cede to a different generation. I think given precedents in places like Zimbabwe, I don't think one should count on that happening any time soon, but I think youth do play a very important role.

Let me try and summarize this: I think we are answering in the positive, that peaceful political transition is possible. It does require continued engagement, even after the military engagement as we know it ends. It requires a managed reduction – if there is going to be a reduction in international support – not a chaotic one. It requires above all an understanding of Afghanistan's political economy, its tribal character, and that interventions and engagements are really geared to the realities of Afghanistan.

They will always be driven by political imperatives in Western and other capitals, but there has got to be a shift towards working with Afghan reality rather than against it. Let me conclude by saying that one of the great inspiring things about this meeting is the wealth of knowledge about Afghanistan in this room. I see a great many faces! One of the challenges we have is how do we capture that profound knowledge and put it at the service of those who will continue to take serious decisions about the future of Afghanistan, whether in the security sector, the development sector, or indeed in terms of political transition. And a small advertisement here: Chatham House is trying to get a project off the ground that intends to do precisely that.

The very last thing I'll say before thanking the speakers is that as members of Chatham House, please be reminded that voting is open for the Chatham House Prize winner 2013. There is a ballot box at reception, or you can vote online, so please do vote.

Let me conclude by thanking you all very much for your time and thank the speakers for very stimulating and interesting presentations. Thank you.