Ambassador Burn...: And very much look forward to her views on the struggles ahead. Ambassador Rahmani will be joined by General David Petraeus. David, of course, former Director of the CIA, former Commander of American forces in Afghanistan, 37 years in the United States Army, an Aspen Strategy Group member, a patriot. Also, be joined by Ambassador Mike McKinley, former United States Ambassador to Afghanistan. Mike is a protean man, who is also our ambassador to Brazil, Peru, and Colombia. He was a senior adviser to Secretary Mike Pompeo before retiring from the foreign service, and I was very proud to stand with him as we were sworn into the US foreign service together a long time ago, Mike, September 1982.

Last but not least, my close friend, Professor Meghan O'Sullivan, Harvard Kennedy School professor, Aspen Strategy Group Member, Chair of the North American group of the Trilateral Commission, author of Windfall, and changing global energy patterns, and for this discussion, former Deputy National Security Adviser for both Afghanistan and Iraq in the White House for President George W. Bush.

Amna, Americans are remembering, these days, 9/11, the tragedy of 9/11. NATO's invocation of Article Five, which I remember as the American ambassador of NATO at the time, the incredible commitment that our soldiers, civilians, aid workers, citizens made over the last 20 years, and I suppose that it's worth talking about those last 20 years, because a lot of good happened, a lot of mistakes were made at the same time. In Afghanistan, at present, what will be the consequences of the American and NATO withdrawal, and what will be the fate of the Afghan people? There's a lot to discuss. We couldn't have a better moderator than Amna Nawaz. Amna, thank you.

Amna Nawaz: Thank you very much, Nick. And thank you to all the panelists for being here. There's a lot of ground to cover. So I am just going to jump right in. Before we talk about possible scenarios moving forward, and lessons learned, of course, which are key to those scenarios, as well, I do want to talk very briefly about where we are right now. General Petraeus, I do want to start with you, because it was not too long ago, just a few weeks ago, when you gave an interview, and you said, "I fear we are consigning Afghanistan to a civil war." But you also said there was still a chance, there was still a chance there could be a plan for stabilizing the situation. This was just three weeks ago, or so. Do you still believe that to be true right now?

David Petraeus: Well, there is certainly a good deal that the United States could do to help Afghanistan stabilize what is an increasingly dire security situation. There is fighting inside now Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, there's fighting on the outskirts of Herat city, fighting inside the outer parts of Kandahar city. These are major cities, capitals of major provinces, and the situation is very, very grim, indeed. Could the US do something? Yes, it would require quite a significant reversal of the policy decisions, and it would require us going back in to provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, drones, and close air support, all of which is vastly more difficult now, because, of course, we've given up the basis that we had in the country, Bodrum, in Kandahar, and in particular.

Let me just point out, if I could, Amna. But keep in mind that we didn't just withdraw our 3,500 forces, that resulted in the withdrawal of 8,500 coalition forces who were doing a lot of the train and equip mission as we were doing the enabling missions, noting that, of course, our soldiers were not on the front lines, and we haven't had a battlefield loss in about a year and a half. But that resulted in then the departure of 15,000 or more contractors who are the critical elements in maintaining and sustaining the Afghan Air Force, which has gotten a lot of US-provided helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, and also many other vehicles and weapons systems also US-provided.

So, not only have we withdrawn the extraordinary enablers that we used to provide, again, the drones and close air support, precision close air support, we've also then pulled out the contractors, or they had to pull out, that actually keep the Afghan replacements for what we have, which are nowhere near the equivalent of what we provide. But that, even, now is really in danger of being unmaintainable. Beyond that, of course, they're expanding munitions at a much greater rate, so we need to dramatically increase the resupply of those.

So, there are a lot of steps that we could take that could help Afghanistan stabilize a more defendable, if you will, security line, but that would require quite a policy reversal at this point in time. But let's recognize how dire the situation is, and the fact that there are not just these 18 or 20,000 former battlefield interpreters who served more than two years, and therefore qualify for a special immigrant visa times two or three family members each. Now, commendably, the State Department has expanded a new opportunity, but we're talking about probably hundreds of thousands, and I don't know how you get them out at a time when the Kandahar and Herat airfields are being shelled, and ultimately, Kabul itself is going to come under pressure.

I said in the beginning that I feared that we would come to regret this decision. I didn't fear that we would regret it as soon as I think we are now. Because, again, this situation is seriously dire. The president of the country is now calling on the former warlords to bring their militias back to service to help the government forces try again to stabilize a deteriorating situation. So, again, this is [inaudible 00:06:09].

Amna Nawaz: General, briefly, if I may. Fair to say a reversal, a policy reversal of that scope and scale, very unlikely at this point?

David Petraeus: I suspect it is. Again, I'm not in the counsels of war, if you will, in this particular case, but presumably so.

Amna Nawaz: I'd love to turn to Ambassador Rahmani now, to understand some more about the dynamics on the ground. We cannot underscore this enough. Ambassador, The Taliban have now, by some estimates, captured more than half of the country's 400 or so districts, they continue on with their military march. That's despite public messaging that they're committed to a political negotiated settlement. As you watch all of this unfold, help us understand, what is The Taliban position here? Is this an attempt to basically throttle the government slowly, rather than just take it by force?

Roya Rahmani: Thank you. Greetings and good morning to all the distinguished panelists. About the situation on the ground, there is one reality, that everybody in the international community has come to the consensus that Afghanistan's war may not have a military solution, except for The Taliban, I believe. There are, of course, forces back in the country that benefit from war and continuation of that. Having said that, it seems that The Taliban are just continuing the war, and they would like to have a military victory [inaudible 00:07:44] continuing to attack the centers, and the civilians, unfortunately, bear the brunt of this, because they want to have that statement of victory announced.

Now, if we pull back a little bit and look at the bigger picture the war in Afghanistan that has been there for over past 40 years has not really changed much. The nature of war in Afghanistan has not changed much. It's always over power, and there are groups that are getting support from a variety and a range of the regional actors, and it is cheap to continue. Ambassador Khalilzad said that the USS trying to make sure that it's not a cakewalk for The Taliban, but I don't think that they mind that rocky road to walk to get to their statement of victory. One thing that has changed in the past four years is that the culture of war has deepened much more, that is directly fueling this situation. So as I am looking at the situation, unfortunately, the current attempts to end this conflict and reach a settlement is not working. We need new approaches.

Amna Nawaz: Dr. O'Sullivan, you penned a piece recently arguing that this meant the withdrawal of US troops wasn't an end to the forever war as it was being messaged, it was just a new chapter in that war. What did you mean by that?

Meghan O'Sulliv...: I think this is an argument that General Petraeus has also made. I think we've done a disservice to Americans and others by talking about Afghanistan as the forever war. Of course, it's true, the US and its coalition partners and the Afghans have been fighting this war of one variety or another for 20 years. But the nature of the US involvement has changed dramatically over this time, and I'm not sure how much the average American can appreciates the different level of commitment that the US has.

So, when we talk about ending the forever war, we're talking now about withdrawing, as the administration has recently done, about 3,500 US troops. That's in contrast to over maybe 150,000 US troops that were there at the peak of the Afghan surge under President Obama. So we have actually ended the forever war. We ended it by finding what could have been a very sustainable relationship with Afghanistan to help the Afghans ward off the worst kinds of possibilities.

That is not very satisfying for Americans, because we wanted to see a different kind of Afghanistan, we wanted to see a sustainable democracy, and the kind of commitment that might have been made or continued to be kept by the administration couldn't have guaranteed that, but it could have helped stave off worse outcomes. So what I mean by it's not ending that forever war is that, as we can see very clearly already, conflict is going to continue in Afghanistan. I think there are some clear choices that the US administration could still make to try to fend off the worst versions of a catastrophe.

But the end of the day is that although we all agree, as the ambassador said, that there is no military solution, the reality is, that's been in agreement for some time, and that doesn't preclude ongoing fighting, because, of course, people are looking to change their strength at the ultimate negotiation table. So The Taliban, ultimately, as Ambassador Khalilzad said, might decide that it needs to come to some kind of political agreement. But that doesn't mean it won't do everything it can to maximize its advantage on the ground before doing so, and that could of course, result in enormous loss of life for Afghans, humanitarian disaster, refugee flows, and of course, also, the possibility of the reconstitution of terrorism groups that could pose a terrorist threat to others in the region and beyond.

Amna Nawaz: That is the point on which I'd love to turn to Ambassador McKinley. Thank you for that wonderful segue. Because, as we know, Ambassador, one of the key arguments for the US was, we went into Afghanistan to get bin Laden, mission accomplished. We also went in there to make sure that there were no more groups that could pose a security threat to the US or to our allies. As the Afghanistan Study Group and other groups have found, that may not be necessarily true. Are you seeing a sense of history repeating here, where we are basically ceding fertile ground to a group that could, again, host groups that could be a danger to the US and its allies?

P. Michael McKi...: Well, thank you for having me. First, let me acknowledge the interview General Sami Sadat just gave about an hour ago on BBC on the situation in Lashkar Gar. I'm sure everyone on this panel, everyone listening, our thoughts are with the Afghan armed forces as they seek to deal with the recapture of the city. It's a very serious situation, as General Petraeus has pointed out. In terms of looking at this moment, however, I think it's very important to take a step back, look at it in geopolitical terms, but also look at it in terms of what happened over 20 years of US engagement on the ground in Afghanistan.

There's a strong argument to be made, as President Biden did in his statement, explaining the decision to withdraw. In over 20 years, certain key objectives were achieved related to rooting out Al-Qaeda and killing bin Laden. But more broadly, he pointed to, and I think absolutely accurately, the world has changed in the last 20 years, and the issues the United States has to deal with have changed dramatically, as well. They include the appearance of new challenges from China, from Russia, new technologies, pandemics, climate change concerns.

We also saw, over the 20 years, a United States that was so focused on... and I will continue using the term, forever wars. So focus on the forever wars, that we spent $3 trillion, sent 2.7 million young Americans to fight in these wars. I would remind that that 3 trillion figure is what we're discussing now about the urgent investments we need in our infrastructure and modernizing our economies. We didn't win in any of the wars, and in the meantime, there were these profound changes in the world, which we now have to catch up to and respond.

When people make the argument that there's still a terrorist threat in Afghanistan, and that it will become more intense, should there be a change of government in Kabul, which we all sincerely hope will not happen, the fact of the matter is, the argument is for an indefinite stay of US troops, when, for years, we've been saying we've diminished Al-Qaeda to almost nothing, and when the focus of terrorist activity in the world has shifted to the Middle East, more properly, in Iraq, and Syria, and we certainly see it in the Sahel now.

I don't think anybody's arguing for positioning garrisons of American troops through another half dozen countries to deal with terrorist threats, which are much more evident, and much more near to the United States. I would add that the negotiation with The Taliban, and there's questions that can be raised about how these negotiations were concluded, very much posit the United States reacting, should The Taliban decide to return to terrorism.

More centrally, it's been three administrations that have wanted to reduce troops to zero in Afghanistan, starting with President Obama, and the objective was to do so by the end of 2016. It didn't happen. President Trump came in with a determined agenda to withdraw troops from one month to the next. As Ambassador Khalilzad knows, the negotiations were very much an effort to create a structure and timetable for withdrawal that didn't lead to an immediate withdrawal, which would have led to much greater chaos.

So the fact that the Biden administration has announced the timetable for withdrawal is in the context of what has been US government, not Democrat, not Republican policy, for the last many years. In that context, I would suggest there's been 18 months, 24 months, when the situation on the ground could have been prepared in terms of the correct military approach, garrisoning cities, supporting Afghan forces. But the fact of the matter, and this would be my second point, we need to take a step back and look at what failed.

Anybody wants to check out what we were saying about the war in Afghanistan, go back and look at the bi-annual statements to Congress on enhancing security and stability in Afghanistan from 2012, 2013 onwards. Every time we were talking about how the Afghan forces were taking on 98% of the fighting, that they were ready to take on The Taliban, that The Taliban was losing ground, that The Taliban couldn't resist the pressures, and that the Afghans' special security forces were among the best in the region. We were also spending tens of billions of dollars a year.

So the hard question should be, why are we seeing such a quick collapse? Where are the 330,000, 350,000, 380,000 troops? Why wasn't that focused on earlier? So I think there's a lot of questions to be answered about how our security support worked, how we described the war as it progressed. I repeat, every single one of those reports, until the last two, suggested things were improving, and the Afghan security forces were capable of dealing with The Taliban, increasingly, on their own. As we look at reports that are emerging now, of soldiers not being paid for months on the front, of supplies not reaching them, let's ask what happened to the graft, corruption, and misallocation of resources, which amounts to over $20 billion of US taxpayer money.

The final point. A lot of spin said that no US lives have been lost over the last year plus. That's a result of an agreement negotiated in Doha, which posited the US would leave, and The Taliban agreed not to attack. Make no mistake. If we had reversed that, we'd be targets, and our mission in Afghanistan would be targets. For those who say low cost, I would suggest they meet with gold star mothers and attend services in the memory of 18 and 19-year-olds being killed for a cause it's unclear. It's time to consider this a real curse in lives, as well as treasure.

On treasure, to say that spending an extra 15, $20 billion a year to support a presence in Afghanistan, when we're arguing over whether to support half a million dollars in assistance to 5 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants in our hemisphere, or whether we can come up with $1 billion for Central American countries dealing with a range of issues, it's all a question of scale. I would suggest reorienting 15 to $20 billion of indefinite support on the ground is an important decision to take. Thanks.

Amna Nawaz: A number of interesting points you raise there. I do want to just pin back to Professor O'Sullivan for one of those [inaudible 00:20:28], because you were a member of that Afghanistan Study Group. This has been a central part of the US argument for withdrawal, was that there is no longer a threat on the ground. If we're talking about lessons learned, I just wanted to get you to briefly respond to some of the points made by Ambassador McKinley, please.

Meghan O'Sulliv...: Thank you. First, just on the point about the Afghan Study Group and what we heard. This was a congressionally-mandated group that met for about nine months of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 to prepare a report for the incoming administration on options in Afghanistan. I would say, with all respect to Ambassador McKinley, that it wasn't a surprise, it isn't a surprise that we're seeing the kinds of weaknesses in the Afghan national security forces, and the quickness with which The Taliban has acted.

Some of the briefings that we received as part of that Afghanistan Study Group made it very clear that one, yes, it's true that Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan have been massively degraded. I won't dispute that. But they also found that that was a direct result of the actions of the coalition. So, that's important to remember. The other thing that really made a huge impression on me and others in the study group was that we received briefings from, again, defense and intelligence people, saying that their best estimate was that if the United States were to withdraw precipitously, as I think we can consider the current withdrawal, they expected that within 18 to 36 months, that terrorist groups could reconstitute sufficiently to become a threat to the US homeland.

So again, I think that a lot of Ambassador McKinney's points are well-argued in the sense that Americans will find... will be very sympathetic to them. I'm sympathetic to the exhaustion that Americans and others feel from 20 years in Afghanistan. There's no question about that. But there isn't really a time limit on US interests. In fact, I think we still find that we do have interests in ensuring that in the absence of a coalition presence, that those terrorist groups are not able to reconstitute in Afghanistan.

As you know, The Taliban has a close relationship with Al-Qaeda, and as The Taliban become stronger, it's likely that Al-Qaeda will try to reconstitute itself. We know that ISIS has a strong presence in Afghanistan. This isn't an argument for a huge commitment. We obviously have other considerations. But I'd like to respond directly, at least. There's so many issues I'd like to respond to. But one argument for the withdrawal, which I think has gotten a lot of attention, and rightly so, is this notion that America needs to turn its attention elsewhere.

I understand China is a much bigger consideration for the US, and I believe we do have to turn our attention increasingly to China, but I don't think this is really an issue of saying if we leave Afghanistan, we're going to be better positioned to deal with China. One, we're talking about a comparatively small amount of resources. And I'm not diminishing any of the lives that have been lost, but just in terms of financials.

The options that we're looking at now are not cost-free. If we are going to have a military option of airstrikes from the Gulf, that is costly. It's not as costly as maintaining bases, but it's not cost-free. Maintaining support for the Afghan national security forces, which I hope we continue to do, which will be a key element in staving off worst case scenarios, could cost maybe $3 billion a year. Again, not cost-free. But most importantly, that we can't pretend that Afghanistan is in a vacuum, and that China isn't looking at what's happening there, that Russia isn't looking at what's happening there.

If we're concerned about great power conflict, and we want to change our orientation, and really focus on great power conflict, as we should, we have to acknowledge that places like Afghanistan are going to be the venues for great power conflict. For us ceding Afghanistan, as we are, that actually creates more of an opportunity for Russia, China, Iran and others to come in and actually potentially foil US interests.

Amna Nawaz: Ambassador Rahmani, I'd love to bring you back in here, as well, because no one on this panel has better insight into what's unfolding within the government in Afghanistan better than you do. You served in the government for years, you are one of very few women in senior leadership positions, the country's first female envoy to Washington. I need to ask you about this, because anyone who's seen the news recently saw there were some headlines recently related to you, of allegations of corruption and abuse of approval of funds back in... indictments back in Kabul of you and two other officials alleging abuse of authority and approval of funds to repair collapsed wall and damage at the US Embassy. You have denied those allegations, and so I just want to get your response to them, and also ask you, what do you think is behind those allegations?

Roya Rahmani: Well, you refer to the Washington Post article, which lays out what happened, really, in that scenario. But in summary, I could tell you that there were forces who wanted to get rid of me since I was appointed, and they wanted to present the case to President Ghani to convince him, so they fabricated a lot of different things, including this campaign, and the media smear. I must say that I somewhat take pride that it took them two and half years to really manage what they wanted. They were also very frustrated that despite all the pressures brought on to me during the time that I was in here, I was not resigning. So that frustrated them a lot.

But what happened to me in that respect is... basically speaks to the fact that we are suffering from immaturity and insecurity in the Afghan politics, particularly by some really high ranking officials. It's also speaking about the weak system of governance, lack of institutions, due processes, and resistance to the culture of merit. It speaks to inflamed ethnic and deep-rooted gender discrimination that exists.

I don't want to go into the depths and the details of what happened. Of course, what happened was a embassy wall [inaudible 00:27:11] for 30 years, it collapsed, and it needed to be repaired. It wasn't a regular wall, but a retainer wall that that was holding the soil, holding the foundation of the neighbors from basically flooding into the embassy's premise. The decisions were made in Kabul and executed by the embassy based on the instructions. But what happened is what I described to be.

Amna Nawaz: General Petraeus, can I get you to respond to some of these issues raised about this concern Ambassador Rahmani's raised about a mature government. This is the government that the US has said it will continue to back, is throwing its support behind, is saying there does need to be a negotiated political settlement. You also have this issue, as Dr. O'Sullivan raised, of a vacuum left behind by the US, as they leave that government, those forces all vulnerable, and all open to input from China, as we've already seen, to Russia, from Iran. I'm curious what your take is on that, what you worry the influence of those regional forces, who are not necessarily... don't necessarily have the same interest as the US, that influence will be on Afghanistan moving forward. Oh, and I believe you're still muted, sir.

David Petraeus: That's just one of many, many concerns, I think, that we should have in this situation. Look, there is no question, but that Afghan institutions, the Afghan government, Afghan military forces, you name it, exhibit all kinds of shortcomings and deficiencies. The question is, is that better than what is likely to follow if the Taliban take over? Clearly, hundreds of thousands of Afghans think it is, because they're voting with their feet, they are leaving the country. We've seen an extraordinary exodus of Afghans, which I don't think is much of a vote of confidence for The Taliban, who will return Afghanistan to the kind of medieval, ultra conservative, theocratic regime that allowed Al-Qaeda to have the base on its soil, in which the 9/11 attacks were planned, and in which the initial training of the attackers was conducted.

As Meghan noted, yes, certainly, Al-Qaeda is dramatically reduced, but in part, because we have this fantastic platform from which to do that called Afghanistan. The raid that brought Osama bin Laden to justice was launched from Afghan soil and recovered in Afghan soil. It was during the final months that I was privileged to be the commander there. Also, with respect to what these various statement said about Afghan forces, I don't think there was ever an assumption that Afghan forces would be denied the enablers that have been so critical to them.

Again, that was the point that I was seeking to make. Yes, there's no question, but that the deal with The Taliban reduced attacks on Americans. But the fact is that before that deal, there were fewer battlefield losses in all of our ongoing operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, you name it, fewer of those than in the losses in training accidents in the US military. So we had dramatically reduced what it is. Ambassador McKinley is exactly right, and he knows firsthand, of course, of some of these deficiencies and the corruption, and the waste, and all the rest of this, that has always plagued these operations.

But, look, at the end of the day, we are where we are. You can go back and re litigate decisions about various other operations and a variety of different approaches, and certainly, could enumerate a lot of lessons that we have learned and sought to learn and incorporate. But at the end of the day, we were at a point where we had 3,500 troops on the ground, which costs us maybe 10, or 20 billion plus, including all of our support for Afghan security forces that gave us absolute ability to deny Al-Qaeda from returning to Afghan soil, and also now the Islamic status, Meghan properly noted it, the [inaudible 00:31:27] group is now in the AfPak area, as well.

Basically, to sustain an Afghan situation with lots and lots of shortcomings, but certainly far, far preferable to what it is that we are going to see, as the country is now plunged into a civil war, because we were not able to sustain what I would have said was a very sustainable commitment, again, in terms of... and that's measured in blood and treasure. Again, our losses were very, very dramatically reduced, even before the deal with The Taliban, and the cost has dramatically reduced from what I was, for example, privilege to command 150,000 coalition forces on the ground.

So there's no comparison about what we had before and what we have now. I agree very strongly with Meghan, as well, that what we have on the ground or had on the ground in Afghanistan is not necessarily the assets that we desperately need in the Indo-Pacific. Without question, the US and actually Western relationship with China is not just the biggest plate that you have to keep spinning, if you will, as the guy in the circus, it's bigger than all the other plates together. But keeping a small Afghanistan plate going...

I would also note to the ambassador, you do have to keep an eye on extremists. Have we not learned from Iraq, that if you take your eye off extremists... Of course, the big fault there was not us pulling the troops out, it was Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, taking highly sectarian actions. But we did not have the footprint to enable us to keep an eye on what was happening as Al-Qaeda in Iraq reconstituted itself as the Islamic State, and ultimately became a massive problem, not just for Iraq, but for Syria, the region, and indeed, our European allies and partners that required us to go in and to help our Iraqi partners and also our Syrian partners to defeat, and eventually to destroy the caliphate that it was established, and now to continue to keep an eye on the remnants of that.

I strongly agree with the administration's policy to maintain certain capabilities there. Not combat capabilities on the ground, but, again, the intelligence surveillance, reconnaissance assets, other enablers that can help the Iraqi security forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces in a way that we could have done, frankly, in Afghanistan at a vastly, vastly reduced cost. So again, we can go back and look at all of the mistakes and shortcomings and everything else that characterized what it is that we did over the past 20 years, but I think we should have learned from those past 20 years in fighting Islamist extremists, that you cannot take your eye off them, that if you give them ungoverned space, or space governed by groups like Taliban, they'll exploit it. What happens there doesn't stay there, the Las Vegas rules don't apply.

Generally, the US has to lead the response of a coalition, and you have to do more than just counter terrorist operations, but we should do it through host nation forces, as we have been able to do over the years, not just in Afghanistan, but also in Iraq, in Syria, in Somalia, North Africa, et cetera. The key is to get that cost down, and blood and treasure, to the point that it is sustainable. That is essentially what I think the large lesson is from 20 years of this kind of war. Noting, again, the global context, as the ambassador rightly points out, has changed dramatically, our focus needs to shift. But it doesn't mean that you can let little plates fall off their sticks, because there are consequences for that, and we are seeing that now in Afghanistan, and we will see what lies ahead, as well, which is going to be a brutal civil war.

Amna Nawaz: Ambassador McKinley, I'll invite you to respond to that with the additional context of well [inaudible 00:35:21]. As we all know, both of those wars, Afghanistan and Iraq, have loomed over the United States for the better part of two decades, and the Biden ministration did just announce the end of the combat mission in Iraq, as well. So what would you say in response to what you just heard from General-

David Petraeus: But the continuation of capabilities there, and that's a very-

Amna Nawaz: Correct.

David Petraeus: ... very important caveat.

P. Michael McKi...: Again, I want to say I respect very much what General Petraeus and Professor O'Sullivan have laid out, and they've made very compelling points. Just a couple of issues, perhaps, I could add. On Iraq, frankly, we need to take a step back and ask ourselves if we didn't set off everything that happened after 2003 with a misguided intervention, a misguided first couple of years there, which required redefining our military mission in the country, which is when General Petraeus came in, unleashing a civil war, and creating the ungoverned spaces that allowed the Islamic State to emerge.

I would suggest, also, that as we look at the geopolitical context, our focus on wars and on terrorism over the last 20 years, this is not to relitigate the past. We took our eye off of the biggest economic transformation in world history, we took our eye off of shifting power relations in the world, we attenuated our closest alliances to include NATO, and that was very evident by the time former President Trump took over and was in office. And we neglected our own needs at home, and we saw that come out to be very evident over the last couple of years in terms of polarization, the need for investment in all kinds of areas.

So to suggest that the focus is merely material, I didn't mean to do that. There was a political and social cost, as well, to the decision to focus on the Middle East and Afghanistan, almost to the exclusion of other parts of the world, and it's time now, to deal with the broader concerns. I do think that as we look at the challenge of a possible revival of extremism in Afghanistan, we need to put it in context. It's an argument that's been made by everyone who argues for an indefinite stay in Afghanistan.

I repeat, the facts speak for themselves. We're not in this to help with thousands of troops. We have withdrawn to a small presence in Iraq, notwithstanding the continuing presence of much more visible elements of the Islamic State still in northern Iraq and northern Syria, and we can point to other parts of the world. I'm not suggesting abandoning the struggle against extremism. I do believe repositioning works, and it also allows us to strike back if the issues become more compelling, and I don't think it's going to require another war. But we won't know for the next several years.

On the issue of The Taliban, questions you raised with whether they're serious, what they'll bring, I do think that the idea that The Taliban are negotiating in Doha in good faith or were is just not true. Anyone who's suggesting that these were meaningful negotiations, leading to a peace process, was engaging in aspirational thinking. We're seeing now that The Taliban have seized the opportunity, on the military front, but there's no signs of any concessions anywhere.

On the issue of whether we're opening the ground to others, The Taliban, Mullah Baradar has been visiting China, we had a delegation to Moscow in the beginning of July. Imran Khan is saying he can't do anything to pressure The Taliban on the political side. We've never addressed the issue of the fact that unlike most insurgencies, The Taliban had a 20-year sanctuary to operate from. We've never addressed that fully. It wasn't just a sanctuary, it was support, supplies, and the ability to move fighting men across the border every single fighting season. We still don't confront it and deal with it openly.

But the fact of the matter is, countries are already repositioning themselves, they're signaling China, with their Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, signaling the... looking forward to working with The Taliban, who have an important role to play in Afghanistan. Russians and Chinese, to a lesser extent, indicating better not harbor any terrorists that can threaten us, however, and The Taliban giving assurances, Pakistan also repositioning. I'd suggest that we're going to see other countries doing so, as well. We've seen the outreach, or reports of outreach by the Government of India on the same front.

What I'm trying to say here is new realities are already being created, are already in place, and so the question comes back to Professor O'Sullivan's point on, are places like Afghanistan part of the next balance of power, great power conflict, that people are suggesting is the future of world relations? I would suggest they're not, and that the key issues remain nuclear weapons in North Korea, a nuclear Iran, the emergence in how we deal with China in terms of our relationship across the board, Russia, and the pressure it puts on any number of states in Europe, and our own economic and national economic security revitalization.

I would suggest, having worked a lot in the Western Hemisphere, we could certainly use many more resources to address Western Hemisphere issues that are currently being sent elsewhere. But at the end of the day, I do think the issues that have been raised are important, but there is a moment where you have to rethink this. Final point on the political unity in Afghanistan. It's been a very difficult for 20 years. Afghan political leaders have remained divided. It's significant that we have not seen a national unity call involving all the key leaders of Afghanistan over the last several weeks. There's no clarion rallying to President Ghani.

We are in a situation in which Afghanistan's political leadership also has to make decisions which can inspire the country. I would add an anecdote there, Ismail Khan in Herat has fought in many wars and the country, is out there, rallying the population of Herat to respond. We'll see how that works, but it's certainly an indication of what's needed to address the moment and create the opportunity in the coming months to reconfigure, reset, and see where Afghanistan goes.

Amna Nawaz: General Petraeus, I saw you raise your hand to make a quick point, and I just want to note, we're running short on time. So if you can keep it brief-

David Petraeus: Sure.

Amna Nawaz: ... I'd love to come back to Dr. O'Sullivan and-

David Petraeus: Just one very quick issue here. Actually, on the way home for my three-star tour in Iraq, Secretary Rumsfeld asked me to come home through Afghanistan and do an assessment of a situation. The very first slide in that briefing was titled, Afghanistan Does Not Equal Iraq, and it laid out all the ways in which they were different. The most significant of those is what Ambassador Ken McKinley rightly highlighted, which is the presence of very large sanctuaries, who are all of the insurgents and extremist groups that were making life so difficult, all of that in Pakistan. And we did confront Pakistan, repeatedly. I did this as a central commander, the commander on the ground in Afghanistan, and the CIA director, and obviously, it didn't make much of a difference.

But the idea that we didn't try to deal with that, or that we never confronted that, we confronted it, and we confronted those on whose soil those sanctuaries were located. But that was not enough. The fact is that Ismail Khan is rallying the troops, because Ashraf Ghani has asked for this, unfortunately. We didn't want to see a return of warlords and militias and all the rest of this, you'll see it up in the north in a variety of different locations, as well. That is not something that I celebrate. These are going to be militia elements that will, again, certainly augment the security that the government forces are trying to provide. But this is another step toward a civil war. This is not just a transition.

This is, again, a civil war in which probably millions of Afghans, ultimately, will flee their country, and whatever is left in charge is certainly not going to provide the kind of opportunity that Roya Rahmani enjoyed as a woman in Afghanistan. That's not why we went there. But we should be proud, I think, of the freedoms, of the institutions, however flawed, that Afghanistan does have. They will certainly not be preserved under a Taliban regime, which, again, I think will be a very cheerless place, to put it mildly.

Amna Nawaz: I know we have some audience questions waiting in the wings, and Dr. O'Sullivan, I know you have to leave us a little sooner than everyone else. So I'll invite you to make any final comments, any final points you'd like to make.

Meghan O'Sulliv...: Right. Thank you, Amna. So much to respond to, and such a good conversation. I'd like to come back to one of the issues you raised about the lessons that we have learned. Of course, as we can tell from this conversation, this is still ongoing. I think the US involvement in places like Afghanistan and Iraq is still ongoing, although morphing considerably. But let me just take a stab at a couple of lessons that I think have become evident, although acknowledging that we're still far from really adequately synthesizing, identifying, and internalizing the lessons from these interventions.

The first thing I would suggest, and this isn't a surprise, but it's certainly an important one, is that we all need to be sobered by the amount of resources and the time commitment that it takes to achieve the sorts of gains that we sought, and our Iraqi and Afghan partners sought, and our coalition partners sought in these locations. I think it's very different than the lesson that a lot of people have taken away, is that the US does not know how to do these things, that the United States is incapable of making a difference on the ground in these areas. I don't think that's the case. But I think we have, at times, vastly underestimated the time and the resources required, and I think there's a legitimate question about, in our own political environment, in the United States, whether our democracy is capable of sustaining those.

Another lesson that I would offer has to do with aligning resources and goals and aims. Of course, this is... Grand strategy 101 is that you need to align your resources with your objectives. I would say, quite clearly, at various points of the last 20 years, those things have been seriously out of whack in US strategy towards Afghanistan, and that what we saw in Iraq is that when you do align those properties, you can see real gains on the ground.

And then lastly, the lesson, and, of course, this is just three of many, relates to the conversation about Pakistan that we just heard. This is the reality that the US tends to overestimate the number of things that are really under our control, or our ability to influence. That if we look at Afghanistan, we put enormous effort into trying to affect variables on the ground in Afghanistan, when, in fact, the ultimate success or failure of the effort in Afghanistan might have well laid beyond those borders, in places like Pakistan, where for all of the efforts of General Petraeus and Presidents Obama and Bush and others, we were never really able to shift Pakistan's strategic calculation, which was repeatedly the goal of multiple administrations, to get Pakistan to actually look at its tolerance of extremist groups and The Taliban in its borders as a threat to its own future and national security. We were never really able to affect that calculation.

I think without that, our ability to achieve some of the more ambitious goals, I think, were always going to be in question. So, again, I offer those three things just as a start on the conversation that is much needed in our country and elsewhere about the lessons, and how we can internalize them going forward. Thank you. I'll be on for a few more minutes, and I apologize for having to sign off a little bit early. But I really enjoyed this opportunity to be with you, Amna, and to be with other panelists, and with the Afghan Security Forum. The Aspen Security Forum. I'm actually in Aspen. I'm maybe the only one who is in Aspen.

Amna Nawaz: I think you are the only one [crosstalk 00:48:53] on this panel representing Aspen at this point. Thank you for your time, Doctor O'Sullivan. I hope you can stick around for a couple more questions, if possible. Ambassador, Rahmani, I will turn to you here now, of course, because for all the conversation around US national security interests or Pakistan's continued support of those groups on the ground, no one is more effective than the people in Afghanistan, and I invite you to make your final thoughts at this moment before we turn to audience questions.

Roya Rahmani: Thank you. So let me first also respond to the remarks that were made about the recent development, how Commander Ismail Khan has taken on and is rallying people. As somebody who left this, I left through all of these things happening in the past. I would also echo what General Petraeus is saying, that on one hand, it is a good thing that the people are rallying, that they are showing unity and support, and they are saying no to The Taliban. On the other hand, what is next? How is this going to stabilize the situation? What does arming more and more people mean? We are already an overly armed people with not much of rule of law.

So, in terms of all the fabulous in rights and possibilities that we have enjoyed over the past 20 years, it seemed like the pendulum of war in Afghanistan was continuously moving for the international community from the counterterrorism to nation building and back and forth, while The Taliban continuously kept themselves in the center, and they functioned from that base. So with that, I think the options are really shrinking.

Before going to what is left in terms of the options, I want to also address a few points in terms of the role of the region, and particularly that of Pakistan, as you mentioned. I believe that Pakistan has a huge role to play, and we wouldn't be able to get to a negotiated settlement, which is everybody's desire, and the only solution, at this point, without their help. But, however, it seems that the understanding of Pakistan, of how this war would go, has not changed. I will remember that 10 years ago, or actually, more now, General Ashfaq Kayani said that one day Taliban will take over, and I think that Pakistan has continued to function with that assumption.

The other issue is that continuously, in order to get Pakistan to cooperate, the incentives that have been used have not been the most viable one. I don't believe that in Pakistan's economic development and connectivity calculus, Afghanistan stability is a determining or irreplaceable factor. So, that being always the focus in order to build confidence and to get them to cooperate hasn't really necessarily worked.

Lastly, the incentive mechanisms implemented by international community to get the region to cooperate has not really worked. So where we are, what are some of the possible options? Unfortunately, I think the options are shrinking day by day, as the situation deteriorates, the security situation, and the results of it. So I believe that we really need to rethink the approach that that has been adopted towards Afghanistan. The solutions that has not worked, and have been tried in the past are probably not going to work in the future, either.

So the options, unfortunately, are very limited. One, is the world really ready to step on the side and watch what happens, which would be a human catastrophe? Right now, there is over 20 million people at the verge of starvation, 270,000 people have been displaced since the beginning of just 2021. The other option would be to adopt a really hands-on approach by international community to try to negotiate a settlement. When I say hands-on, they have to be involved. You can't just leave it for the same term that it has to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, which is important to be, which is important that it would be... the Afghan should be making the decision. But there should be a lot more international involvement to make it happen, and make it happen soon before it's too late. And then to also establish forces to sustain the agreement, whether it takes peacekeeping forces or whatever it is.

Amna Nawaz: Thank you very much for that, Ambassador Rahmani, and I apologize to our audience members I've kept waiting. I know we have a few waiting in the wings with their questions now. Actually, Ambassador Burns has joined us again, and maybe we don't have time for questions. I'll turn it over to you.

Ambassador Burn...: Amna, we have three minutes. Please proceed.

Amna Nawaz: Wonderful. I think, correct me if I'm wrong, I believe Farah Pandith is with us, and has a question for the panel. There she is now. I'll turn it over to you, Farah.

Farah Pandith: Good afternoon, and it's a pleasure to be with all of you. I wanted to pull the thread on the issues of extremism and ideology alongside with Pakistan. I'm wondering, if we're looking... this panel is about lessons learned and what we should be doing is also thinking about how to build a strategy, that you look around the corner. So here is my question, what should the United States be doing as we think about the ideology that The Taliban is spreading? Whether it's in the form of their particular kind of extremism or AQ or ISIS, this isn't going away, and ideology has no borders. So my question is, what should we be doing now, as we think about the threat for the future?

Amna Nawaz: Who'd like to take that first?

David Petraeus: I'd be happy to take it, because I actually think that this is something that the administration is quite keenly focused on. In announcing the withdrawal, President Biden was very clear of the potential return of Al-Qaeda. Like Ambassador McKinley, I don't think that Al-Qaeda, even if it is able to reestablish a sanctuary in Afghanistan, is going to be a threat to our homeland anytime soon. But, given time, that could be problematic, and I think the administration, rightly, the military, and CIA and others, are riveted on ensuring that we identify any immersions of some kind of extremist sanctuary. And then we will take appropriate steps to disrupt and degrade it and destroy it, if we can, noting that, of course, it will be much more costly to do this from bases in Qatar and the UAE, or off an aircraft carrier than it was to do it from bases in Afghanistan.

Maybe, if I can, I might just offer my final comment, as well. You noted, at the beginning of this session, that I said when the decision of withdrawal was announced, that I feared that we had consigned Afghanistan to a brutal civil war. Frankly, I am deeply saddened that that assessment appears to be validated, or being validated, because... and all because, again, we could not sustain what I think was quite a sustainable commitment, and similar to that which we have in other places around the world.

With great respect in the Sahel, if you aggregate all the forces that we have there, I think you would find it is very close to 1000, if not about that number. So, I think the biggest lesson of all this is that you have to have a sustained, sustainable commitment to keep an eye on extremists, even as we rightly refocus, rebalance, and emphasize the issues involving the US and Western relationship with China, vastly more than all these put together. But you do have to keep these smaller plates spinning, even as you keep that big plate spinning. Thank you again, Amna, and thanks to my fellow panelists, to the ambassador, and to the former ambassador. Thank you.

Amna Nawaz: Thank you, General Petraeus. I believe I am up against the clock here. So Ambassador Burns, I think we probably don't have time for one more question?

Ambassador Burn...: Unfortunately, we don't. I wish we did. But I want to thank Amna Nawaz for leading this very honest, open, very frank, I would say difficult and important discussion. Thank you to Ambassador Rahmani, to General Petraeus, to Ambassador Mike McKinley, to Professor Meghan O'Sullivan. I must say I'm left with a strong feeling of how tragic this situation is for the Afghan people and for the United States. Tragic for all of us who work to bring peace to that country, tragic to see the return of a despicable group like The Taliban.

I guess, I'm just left with a difficult question, what can we Americans do to help those Afghans who were loyal to us, and to help them live a life of security and freedom in our country, if that's what they choose to do? We're talking about the thousands of people that Mike McKinley talked about the very beginning. So, thank you to all of you for this important discussion. We will continue this in Aspen, and I'm going to thank you again. We're now going to turn to another important discussion on a very different subject.