Nicholas Burns: We're going to have a discussion now of Afghanistan and two parts. The first part will be a conversation between Amna Nawaz and Ambassador Zal Khalilzad. I think all of you know that Amna is chief national correspondent of the PBS NewsHour and I might say my wife and I watch the PBS NewsHour almost every evening. And the intelligence, the seriousness of purpose that you and your colleagues bring to the news is a breath of fresh air in American media. So thank you for that. And I know that you have a very diverse set of interests yourself as a correspondent, obviously American foreign and defense policy is part of it and Afghanistan is part of it so welcome Amna. And to my friend Zal Khalilzad whom I have known and worked with for a long, long time.

Zal, I think you probably have the most difficult job in the world right now in trying to work to the Afghan national government with the Taliban, with the United States, with the NATO countries, the partner countries to produce a state of, at least, stability at a time of withdrawal. And may I say even the hope at some point in the future of peace for the people of Afghanistan and of the region. So we're looking forward to this conversation that I'm going to now lead with with Zal. And then following that conversation on that, we'll have four very experienced people in Afghanistan join you. And I'll just introduce them at that time and allow you to take the conversation away. But thanks to both of you for giving us some insight into one of the most difficult issues that we face now. What do we do in Afghanistan? Amna, thank you.

Amna Nawaz: Ambassador Burns, thank you so much for that very kind introduction and for your support, your family support of the NewsHour, I'll pass that along to my team as well. And Ambassador Khalilzad welcome to you. It's really good to be in conversation with you and thank you for making the time.

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well, it's great to be with you and thanks to Mr. Burns as well.

Amna Nawaz: So I know we don't have very much time and I'm thinking we're reserving some time on the back end for questions as well, which I'm sure a lot of people out there have. So let's just jump right in. I don't need to tell you what's been going on, on the ground in Afghanistan for the last few days, just a quick rundown of some of the headlines as we've been paging through them in the last two or three days. The Taliban have struck the Kandahar Airport, they entered the city of Lashkar Gah, seized a TV station there which is now no longer broadcasting. There was a big report this morning about them surrounding prisons and looking to free many of those captured fighters. I'm curious from your perspective, as you're watching all of this unfold, how are you processing it? What goes through your mind as you see this slow deterioration on the ground continue?

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well, the situation is very concerning and our expectation is that both the government and Talibs would focus on a political settlement. Right now the government's primary focus is to find its military bearings if you were like after the losses that it suffered in recent weeks. And to develop a new military strategy and to implement that strategy, believing that without that it's in too weak a position to pursue a negotiated settlement. And the Talibs have been emboldened by the developments of recent weeks in terms of the gains that they have made and are in a maximalist frame of mind. But we believe that there is no military solution. Ultimately for Afghanistan to have peace and stability there's needs to be a negotiated political settlement that has broad support in Afghanistan and broad support in the region and beyond.

The reason I mentioned the region for the Afghans it's obvious why they would want peace, is that the broad, at least supported agreement is important for us and the others in the region and the world to provide the assistance that Afghanistan will continue to need. So it is a difficult situation, but I believe that there is no alternative ultimately by the political settlement and agreement between the Republic and the Taliban.

Amna Nawaz: What of anything you've seen on the ground so far lead you to believe that the Taliban are in any way committed to a political settlement?

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well, they say there is no military solution that there is a political settlement. The US-Taliban agreement said that there has to be, based on negotiations, a new Islamic government and a comprehensive ceasefire. The government has had some concerns in that regard, believing that it itself is an Islamic government, why a new Islamic government? And two, that the negotiations should be on bringing the Taliban into the current government rather than the establish of a new one.

The Taliban on the other hand believe that the current government is the result of a military occupation and that both their constitution, the constitution that they drafted when they were in power and the current constitution of 2004 should be put aside, and there should be an agreement on an interim constitution leading to the establishment of a new one. They also would like to, at this point they are demanding that they take the lion's share of power in the next government, given the military situation, as they see it. And they are discussing these things. A lot of it is not in the public domain, but they are far apart in other words, and they're trying to affect each other's calculus and the terms by what they are doing in the battlefield.

Amna Nawaz: But they may be delivering the message that they want to have a political settlement. But the reality on the ground shows that they continue with their military advancements, correct?

Zalmay Khalilza...: That is correct.

Amna Nawaz: So I guess the question is, and President Biden was asked about this as well. Do you trust the Taliban to stick to their word? I put the same question to you, do you trust the Taliban?

Zalmay Khalilza...: We're talking about international politics and especially with a group that we have been fighting for 20 years. So it is not a question of trust. No... We obviously have reached an agreement with them on a variety of issues, that's with the Taliban, but at the same time, given the trust deficit that exists we are taking measures to be able to secure our interests with appropriate preparations for example, on terrorism, while our forces are withdrawing from Afghanistan, the withdrawal is almost completed. We are positioning ourselves over the horizon, as we say, to be able to monitor and to act if the Taliban violate the terms of the agreement. And of course, it's too soon to say that we trust them, that they will do what they say. But we take them at their words, we hold them accountable for what they've agreed, but we also are taking measures to make sure that we can protect our interests.

Amna Nawaz: What does that accountability look like? I mean, you mentioned US interest, national security interests, for sure. I'm assuming that means continued potential counter-terrorism airstrikes if it looks as if US national security interests are in some way endangered. But you've said previously that you believe the Taliban want legitimacy and they want credibility on the international stage. From whom do you think you want that? Because the US has essentially lost most of its leverage by withdrawing troops?

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well, we have withdrawn our troops or are withdrawing our troops, but we remain very much engaged. We don't want to repeat the mistake of the post-Soviet period when together with the Afghans, we achieved a great objective of pushing the Soviet out and then we abandoned Afghanistan with very negative consequences including 9/11. We don't want to repeat that. So we will remain engaged, provide assistance to the military in Afghanistan as well as to the people, development and humanitarian assistance. But the leverage with regard to the Taliban is that the Taliban said they do not want to be a pariah state. They want to be recognized. They said they didn't know what recognition was when they came to power in the '90s, because power had come to them very quickly and they had emerged from the Kandahar areas of Afghanistan, but now they do.

They want to receive assistance. They say they want to get off the various lists that put restrictions on travel for them. And they recognize that if they don't have normal relations with others, others could support their opponents in Afghanistan. So they have their own reasons for wanting to seek normalcy with the rest of the world, but are they going to do what it takes for that normalcy to take place? And that's where the leverage comes.

We have made it clear that for us and for our allies to be able to recognize the government, provide assistance to it there has to be five criteria. It has to be the government resulting from negotiations have to be broad-based, that the people of Afghanistan's fundamental rights, including the rights of women have to be respected. The people will have to have a say in who governs them, there has to be no threat of terrorism from Afghanistan to the neighbors and beyond, to us. And lastly that Afghanistan as to respect its commitments in terms of international law and international humanitarian law. So we've made those clear to them.

Amna Nawaz: But I suppose, what is it that's tying them in any way to meeting US metrics? Why should they only rely on the US for that legitimacy and for that assistance, when they could get it elsewhere? There was just a senior Taliban delegation visiting with senior officials in China, who said that they expect the Taliban to play a significant role in the future government and reconstruction of Afghanistan. So couldn't they just go to other countries for that and not have to meet US metrics?

Zalmay Khalilza...: Sure. No. Well, the US is important to them they say, but you're right that there are others. And part of our strategy and effort has been to build consensus and understanding with others. For example, we have a US-Europe group that has met very recently, and we issued those five conditions that I said jointly that that will inform our approach. We have a Troika Plus entity that we have established a couple of years ago, that was Russia, China, and ourselves and Pakistan that we have issued similar statements. And I'll be meeting with them in a few days. Again, and there is an effort to build a regional consensus because the neighbors are very important along the same lines. So there is surprisingly broad agreement internationally in terms of what kind of settlement would be acceptable to the world.

It is the Afghans, the Afghan leaders who face a challenge, they're far apart. The time has come for them to learn from the lessons of their country's history, where one faction has sought to impose its will by force on others, it has led to war, long war. And whether they would repeat that mistakes such as the mistake of the post-Soviet period, or they would come together, accept each other, agree on a formula that meets the legitimate interests of both sides. But reflects the broad aspiration of the Afghan people for an end to this terrible war that has gone on for over 40 years.

Amna Nawaz: I hear you referencing specific parts of the deal, the agreement that was negotiated with them. And we have seen already so many breaches of that agreement. And I want to ask you specifically about women because this is something that's obviously caught a lot of people's attention. We'd see each week, there's a new report of another district in which the Taliban take power. They've already put into place elements of that brutal regime that they had back in the '90s even if they say that they do not. Reports of girls ages 12 and older, already thousands of them being forced from schools in districts across the country. Is there anything, is there any next move for the US? Assuming the Afghan government and national forces right now do not have the power to secure those districts, is there anything that the US can do to protect the rights of women and girls on the ground right now?

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well, right now, of course the war that's going on, and we are supporting the Afghan government, the security forces of Afghanistan. Not only providing it with the financial resources, but also with close air support when needed and meets the standards of the US-Taliban agreement. But we also are engaging with the Talibs and with our allies, and you've seen our public statements of great concern and admonition with regard to reports that we see that are very concerning. But as I said before that for Taliban to be accepted as a legitimate partner, for Taliban to not to become once again, a pariah or continue to remain a pariah, and if they take over the government as a pariah, they need to meet those standards that I described.

We will continue to press them ourself, with our allies and with the international community. And we will stand with the government until there is a political settlement, but the government too needs to understand that there is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. That the interests of the Afghan people and the requirements of peace has to be put ahead of any personal interest of any particular leader and that the settlement requires a new government and that that government needs to be a negotiated government with broad support... That can have broad support in Afghanistan and be acceptable to the international community for it to provide assistance.

Amna Nawaz: Ambassador I'd like to ask you about the case of the last American hostage, Mark Frerichs, a US contractor who was kidnapped by the Taliban back in January of last year. According to several reports the Taliban have been asking for the release of Bashir Noorzai, who's been in US custody for years now, for several months since last summer, I believe. Is there any point at which you think the US should agree to just release Noorzai for the sake of getting Mark Frerichs home safely?

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well, we want to get him home safely, Mark. I and my colleagues talk to the family and I've raised it repeatedly and continued to raise it with the Taliban whenever I see them, we also raise the issue with countries with influence on the Taliban. I don't want to get into the exact details of the negotiations and discussions that we have with them. Suffice to say-

Amna Nawaz: When you say countries with influence, I apologize just to be clear, you're talking about Pakistan?

Zalmay Khalilza...: For example, and Qatar and ask for their help. But suffice to say, I want to... That we are very focused on this. This is a very high priority for the United States is to bring Mark home safely and as soon as possible.

Amna Nawaz: But when you say it's a high priority, though, and I have to put to your questions that I've received from the families themselves, they say that you signed a deal with Taliban knowing that he had already been kidnapped weeks after the FBI had contacted them. And we knew that he was in Taliban custody. They worry that all the leverage is now gone. That Mark is not a priority.

Zalmay Khalilza...: That's not correct. The record that you just mentioned is not correct. Mark was kidnapped before the signing of agreement, but it was our information at that time and that he was not kidnapped by the Talib, that it was a criminal group that had acquired him. It was later on that we learned that he had been transferred or exchanged for money to some Talib-affiliated group. It was not until many months later that we got an understanding confirmation from the Talibs that they had him. For many months we didn't know, and then for many months that we suspected that now the Talibs have acquired him and that the Talib leadership in Doha that I deal with were denying that they had checked with the groups inside, that they had not confirmed that they had him. But then finally they did.

Amna Nawaz: When you talk to them, what is it that they want to release Mark, Frerichs? What does the US have that they want?

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well, they do say that they want to release him, but that the time has come to kind of close the chapter on prisoners that each side has of the other. And we see things differently and we are pressing them for the release. And as I said to you before, this is one of the highest priorities, and we are working on it. Would rather not get into where we are on that in the discussions with the Talibs.

Amna Nawaz: You are confident you'll be able to bring him home safe?

Zalmay Khalilza...: Wow. I'm very hopeful that we will. It's simply the Talibs want normalcy in terms of relations with us, if they want their own prisoner's release, if they want to get off the list, there are a lot of issues that they want. So we have leverage, continue to have leverage, and we will bring all of them to bear to secure Mark's release and the sooner the better.

Amna Nawaz: Ambassador, you know the title of this conversation is Two Decades On: Lessons from Afghanistan. Very few people understand this country, both personally and professionally as you do. And have played the role that you have in bringing conditions where they are today. And I just wonder, as you watch the situation unfold on the ground, as you look ahead to where you think conversations and negotiations could lead, particularly between the Afghan government and the Taliban when both sides are very much cemented in their positions. What is the best case scenario that you see moving forward?

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well the best case scenario is a negotiated settlement. That's what the people of Afghanistan want. That's what the United States want. We want that to happen as soon as possible, and we'll play our role to assist with that. On the one hand, we're assisting the government so that Talibs do not think that this is going to be a cake walk that they can conquer and take over the country and admonish them, usually putting our leverage, our allies' leverage and international communities leverage to bear that they should have their weight in the government. We're not saying they should not be in the government, but that there should be a government, a formula that has broader support because they are not the whole of Afghanistan. Everyone can see that, that that are other Afghans with different views. So they need to accommodate each other.

As I said again to the government yes, the United States stands with it, supports it, supports the security forces, but the government too needs to recognize that it has to be realistic in terms of what kind of a political settlement, given the facts on the ground, the level of support that exists, they need to be also willing to compromise and to come to an agreement that can work in Afghanistan and for it to work it needs to reflect realities of Afghanistan. And the problem, unfortunately, in the recent history of Afghanistan has been the gap between what is needed and personal ambitions or group ambitions or factional ambitions of this very complex but important country.

I feel personally that having been a witness to the tragedies of Afghanistan of the last 40 years, that this war has no legitimacy anymore. It's just a struggle for balance of power, dispensation of power between various factions. And no Afghan, especially civilian Afghans should die because of that. So I urge flexibility and pragmatism and realism on all sides and we will, along with others, we are bringing the UN more into the process. We are working with the countries that are facilitating negotiations. We're working with the region, we're working with other big powers. We're working with allies. So we are doing all that practically we can to help very a deserving people achieve the peace that they want and they're yearning for.

Amna Nawaz: If I may just a quick follow-up because I do think it helps to be specific here. When you say you're encouraging the government to be realistic, to be pragmatic, what is it you would suggest that President Ghani and other leaders do right now? We know one of the major demands of the Taliban is that he step down. They do not see him as a legitimate leader. Are you suggesting to him that he leave office in order to move forward that negotiated settlement?

Zalmay Khalilza...: No, I'm not suggesting that. I think the political agreement has to be, one, is there going to be a transition period before a permanent government is agreed to? If there is going to be a transition government, how long is it going to be for? What are going to be the institutions of that transitional government? And the key functions that must be performed other than the normal government functions, for example, the drafting of a new constitution and the integration and the kind of disarming and demobilization of forces, the reform of the security sector.

And besides the institutions and the duration and the function, then we who will have that position and the different positions that must be agreed on? So it's in that domain that, yes, there will be a new government, but that government would have to be agreed to by both sides. That force is not going to ultimately prevail in terms of imposing a government. Because if that happens, there will be resistance if one side imposes it and then some neighbors will support it and then we'll have a long war. So Afghanistan's options are a long war or a political settlement. And we believe that wisdom and lessons from history, the aspirations of the people, the expectations of the world, the neighborhood that the Afghans will choose a political settlement, a compromise rather than another long war for this country that has suffered a very long war all ready.

Amna Nawaz: Ambassador I'd love to turn to some audience questions now. And I believe in this instance, I hope someone will correct me if I'm wrong. We have a question from David Rohde of the New Yorker. I believe he will be joining us and there he is.

David Rohde: Hi, Amna? Ambassador Khalilzad thank you for all the incredible effort you've put in Afghanistan over these years. I have a question as a journalist and then a sort of more personal question as a citizen in a way. As a journalist, I want to ask you about the flights that the US, the evacuation flights that are going on right now. The first one was Friday, 200 people were on that. The plans, the latest reports are 700 Afghan military translators being evacuated. But the total number of people who've applied for SIV visas, so former translators is 20,000. Evacuating 700 of them isn't going to come close to getting them out. That's 20,000 translators and on top of that, they have tens of thousands of family members. Why isn't the administration considering a Guam-style evacuation? What President Ford did in South Vietnam? This airlift has to be massively increased. It seems that's question one.

And then the second part is more personal. I was kidnapped by the Haqqani network many years ago. The Afghan journalist who was kidnapped with me, he's now a US citizen living here in Washington. He is desperately trying to get his wife and children out of Kabul. He's desperately trying to get them on one of these flights. He has a legal right to bring them here. And I just as, again a more personal one, I apologize for getting outside of my journalism lane. What do I say to this journalist? He saved my life. He's a US citizen. He has a right to bring his wife and children here, but he can't get them on one of these flights.

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well, thank you very much, David. It's great to see you and thank you for all the good work you've done on Afghanistan dating back to early years when I was also in Kabul. So it's good to see you. And we're very much committed, David to bringing those who work with us translators, interpreters, who've worked with our military, with other parts of our government. If they want to leave Afghanistan to help them come to the United States, we've had a couple of flights already, and we are looking at all options as to what we can do to facilitate and accelerate. We are mindful also that Afghanistan needs the skills and capabilities that these people have, and the best answer would be those who feel threatened to be allowed, and we will help bring them here, but they can also stay safely in Afghanistan and to help their country.

But you can be sure that a lot of people are working very hard in the government looking at all the options that are there, including the ones that you have mentioned. With regard to your journalist friend, I would urge him to get in touch and we'll put him in touch with the embassy there are various categories, as you know and of course, I'm not a lawyer, but I know enough about immigration having been an immigrant myself. And we'll put him in touch with the right person at the embassy to see what can be done to help him.

Nicholas Burns: But just again, one quick follow-up, I'm sorry, Amna. Will you commit to expanding the size of the airlift? 700 people is not... There are tens of thousands of Afghan military translators who are trying to get out.

Zalmay Khalilza...: Well, let me repeat that. We're looking at all options and so I know that there is bi-partisan commitment to this. The president is very much committed to this, so we're looking at options for expediting the effort.

Nicholas Burns: Thank you. David thank you.

Amna Nawaz: David thank you so much for that. I'll never say no to a follow-up as a journalist. Allow me to just say thank you to Ambassador Khalilzad as well for your time. It's a pleasure speaking with you and Nick back to you.

Nicholas Burns: Thank you, Amna. Zal thanks so much for being with us. You're a busy person, you've answered every question forthrightly, may I just say good luck to you.

Amna Nawaz: Thank you [inaudible 00:30:24].

Nicholas Burns: And everything you're trying to do to try to bring about a better situation in Afghanistan I appreciate... We very much appreciate your efforts.