Rethinking U.S. Security:
Navigating a World in Transition

Getting Afghans into the Lead

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RAJIV CHANDRASEKARAN: Good morning. Rajiv Chandrasekaran from the Washington Post. And now it's time for the Afghan war. Time is ticking on the mission there and so it is for us.

Fernando and I are going to keep this fast paced. My goal is to elicit an hour's worth of information from him in 15 minutes.

I just returned from my most recent trip to Afghanistan a few weeks ago. And during that visit, I spent a fair a bit of time with General Allen, who's making major changes in the U.S. and NATO campaign there. Instead of waiting until the very last months of 2014 to hand over the toughest districts and provinces to the Afghan Army, Allen is accelerating the transition. He wants to frontload risk while he still has the time and the combat power to catch the Afghans if they fall.

Unlike his predecessors, who had the luxury of troops and money, Allen, who has to send home 23,000 troops by the end of this September, has been forced to triage. He has narrowed targets for the development of local government, the pursuit of graft, and the development of the country's economy.

His pragmatic focus is on the one prerequisite for America to head to the exits as defined by the White House: Afghan security forces that are strong enough to keep the Taliban from toppling the Kabul government. That means the most important task facing the U.S. military in Afghanistan today is figuring out how to get the Afghan Army into the lead quickly, competently and sustainably.

Joining me up here to give us some frontline insights into this challenge is Major Fernando Lujan. He's a Dari speaking Special Forces officer. His most recent combat deployment was a 14-month stint on a counterinsurgency advisory and assist team in Afghanistan where he was given the mission of embedding with dozens of coalition and Afghan units across southern Afghanistan. He grew a beard, wore and Afghan Army uniform, and ate more goat stew I daresay than anyone in this crowd. He's a '98 West Point grad who has a master's in international policy from Harvard. He's part of the Pentagon's AfPak Hands program and, most importantly, he's doing a fellowship at CNAS in between Afghan deployments this year.

So let's get right to the questions. I've got five of them. Fernando has promised to knock them out in rapid fire fashion.

My first: look, Fernando, aren't Afghan troops hopelessly corrupt and lazy partners just waiting for the chance to shoot an American in the back? (Laughter.)

MAJOR FERNANDO LUJAN: No. I'd be happy to talk about that. First off, let me just say thank you very much to CNAS. I am but a lowly major and it is very, very rare that a guy like me gets the chance to talk to a room full of distinguished people like you. So I know that we have limited time, but I'm going to try to make this as interesting and insightful as possible for your guys.

So to get to our question, bottom line up front, no. That is not the reality that we see, that my team saw in Afghanistan. And I think – I feel really confident saying that just because our job was a little bit different from normal advisors that were on the ground in Afghanistan in that when you're typically deployed to Afghanistan, you spend your time in one district, right? You get to go to the – (inaudible) – mentality and you see your little province or district or battalion, whatever it may be, and get that unique perspective.

But our job, by design, we are in a team that was created by General McChrystal and expanded by General Petraeus to look at trends across the board, to embed with many, many kandaks.

And so we spent that time, like you said, growing the beards with them, in their vehicles, and saw that. And the thing that we saw above all else as that, yes, there were still corrupts and terrible leaders in the ranks. They were there, right? And a lot of these guys were sort of older crowd, senior officers that had been brought in maybe at the very beginning and bought their way into the system and were now kind of clinging to these positions.

But for every one of those guys, we saw four or five or six really aggressive junior leaders that had now spent many years working alongside coalition forces, and we were starting to see the fruits of all of that labor, right? And these guys are aggressive.

And it was a humbling experience to spend the time with these guys in those remote areas and see them every morning after prayer walking up even when, there weren't coalition forces around, and getting in these thin-skinned Ford Ranger pickup trucks and putting these huge Afghan flags up on them, by the way, right, and driving up and down these roads that are the most heavily IED-ed, dangerous places in the entire world, and doing that day after day after day, facing those kinds of dangers. And I saw that, and that really, really struck a chord with me and was something that I honestly, in all candor, I wasn't expecting to see.

MR. CHANDRASEKARAN: And when you were three months into your deployment, you had guys in those kandaks who were three years into their deployments in those places, right?

MAJOR LUJAN: Well, that's right. And I feel like that shades our perspective. When you talked about, well, aren't they all corrupt, aren't they all lazy, they do not care about this stuff, I think that we tend to see through a unique U.S. perspective in that we deploy over there for six or nine months or 12 months. We're tourists. We go over for a short period and we focus – we're on a sprint. We're trying to achieve immediate results – understandably. We're surging resources. We're trying to demonstrate metrics, but we forget about the perspective of the Afghans that in some cases have been there for four or five or six years in the same very dangerous areas. And so resentment starts to build.

Coalition forces on one side of the camp living in relatively nice quarters – obviously, these are Spartan accommodations to begin with – but tents and air conditioning in the operation center in a lot of cases, MWR rooms, Internet, et cetera. The Afghans on the other side in many cases straw and HESCO wires under trash fires. And so this is an environment where it's very easy for cultural misunderstanding to occur and for resentment to build up.

And I think that is sort of the untold story about all the scare over green-on-blue violence, over the threat of Afghans shooting their coalition advisors.

It's not about – part of it is about Taliban agents, and sleeper cells, and trying to penetrate, but the other big piece that no one really talks about is that there is a well of resentment that builds up there and that the Taliban has a simple narrative, and that is the United States is here to occupy Afghanistan and to destroy Islam. And every time we are insensitive in the way that we treat the Afghans – we try to go in there like drill instructors, we use our models and try to graft them onto the Afghans, that provides a reservoir upon which they can recruit people.

And so that is – we've got to pay a lot more attention to that, to thinking about how do we deal with the Afghans in a way that makes sense for them.

MR. CHANDRASEKARAN: With combat operations moving to a close and coalition soldiers switching to more of an advisory role, there's a tendency for all us to assume that the hardest work, the heavy lifting is almost over. You know, most of the members in these new SFATs, the Security Forces Assistance Teams that ISAF is standing up are individual augmentees, others who are coming from units with limited Afghan experience. And there's a view in some quarters out there that anyone, any good officer, any enlisted or NCO with some experience can be an adviser. What do you make of that? Can anyone do this job?

MAJOR LUJAN: Okay. To your first part about it only – the hard part being over, I pretty strongly disagree with that. I think it's actually the really hard work begins right now.

And the reason for that is that, to your second point, that not everyone can do this. And it now becomes – as we're drawing down forces and focusing on the advisory mission – it really becomes getting the right person in the right place on the ground to influence and sometimes influence without authority and be able to do those things. And that is a unique job description that not everyone can do.

And I love the Army. I've been in the Army for 14 years. I think we have the greatest Army in the history of the world, but not everyone in the Army can do the advisory mission. It requires not just the ability to fight, but also the ability to switch gears and build rapport, and negotiate, and to think about problems from a uniquely Afghan perspective. And that is something that is tough and we have to be serious about selecting for those people.

And once we find them, we have to be serious about sending them back so they have continuity, because that's really what builds it. Relationships are the real coin of the realm here and that is what allows you to influence the Afghans. If you're there for six months and you go and to try to treat this as all science, here's the manual, here are the requirements, let me teach you this program of instruction, you're not really going to make an impact on them. It's those longstanding relationships you have to do.

There's a great quote I'll just share with you in this book called The Selection of Men that was put up by the OSS, which I'm sure all of you know was a precursor organization to the CIA and the Special Forces. And there's this great line in there that says that the wrong man can do more harm than the right man can do good.

And that's something that we sometimes forget in the large bureaucracy that we are, and that we need to fill the slot, we need to get somebody in there and we tend to be blind to unique aptitude and talent and experience of these officers. And that's something we really need to be extra-sensitive about, who are the people that are going to be there on the ground advising, the right mix of people to think like that.

MR. CHANDRASEKARAN: Give me your assessment of our overall strategy in building the Afghan Army, particularly there's an awful lot of work going in right now in building FOBs and COPs for the Afghan Army or outfitting existing coalition bases for them. We're doing things like putting up plasma screen monitors and high-speed Internet connections. I mean, are we building a sustainable military over there?

MAJOR LUJAN: Okay. So I have some mixed answers for this. I think to attempt to build the Afghan Army in our image is probably a mistake. The good news is I think we figured that out, but we spent a lot of time arriving at that answer. There's been a lot of effort to do that.

And, honestly, it's easier to do that. I mean, it is easier to go in and say, well, what is the way that we do things? So let's take the counterinsurgency manual, 3-24, and let's translate that into Dari and Pashtu and hand it over to the Afghans, expect them to use that after we leave. Let's use some of our technological advantages, expect them to adopt them.

But the fact is that unless it is organic to the Afghans, unless it is – and for them, frankly, a lot of this is going to be paper and pen-based type stuff. It really is. And it's innovation that we need, but it's almost a reverse type of innovation. We need to be thinking about the way we did this in the '40s, right, before we had any of this technology and building, and in conjunction with the Afghans building mechanisms and systems that can endure when there's no electricity, when you can't get those fancy electronic parts repaired. Those are the sorts of things that we need to be thinking about.

And then, the more important part even than just the material of it is the ideas behind this, like what are organic ideas to the Afghans. I like to think about the advisor mission for us a little bit – I don't know if this is the right example for this crowd, but the movie "Inception," you know, Leo DiCaprio going into people's dreams and – so it's a little bit like that in that you are trying to get inside their minds and trying to get them to believe that that idea, the tactic, the procedure that they're using was their own idea, not yours. And that is really the challenge.

And, again, it goes back to what we talked about, picking the right person, getting them the continuity, getting them years in theater to do that, to build those relationships and then really learning to think from the Afghan perspective so that you can build systems and ideas and processes that are organic and will be accepted by the Afghans. Because, honestly, after we leave, half that stuff may go out the window, right, and we've got to be really smart about what kind of systems, and equipment, and procedures we're getting them.

MR. CHANDRASEKARAN: The drawdown is starting already in Southern Afghanistan, 23,000 out by September. I think the reasonable expectation is more U.S. troops will be coming home next year.

Doesn't a reduction of those forces endanger an advisory mission? How can you provide the necessary support to mentor teams that are out there with Afghan kandaks, Afghan battalions in an environment where you don't have conventional battalions and some of the resources they bring – fires and medevacs – as close by? How do we avoid getting into a world where we were in Afghanistan in the 2005, 2006, 2007 period where you had embedded training teams out there, very much alone and unafraid, and many of them getting into scrapes where they couldn't get help quickly enough?

MAJOR LUJAN: That's a really important question. And I think – yes, if you take anything away from today, I would say that in an advisory mission, the counterintuitive fact is that small can be beautiful – I mean, that smaller teams can be more effective and safer, because of all that the surge has done for us, bring in all these resources and these troops on the ground, a lot of is push into these areas in Southern Afghanistan and we have not been able to go before, right? And that's great. Those are good things.

At the same time, they have created in some cases a disincentive to really focus on the Afghans, on the development of the Afghan forces because, after all, put yourself in the position of a U.S. battalion commander on the ground in Afghanistan that is there for a surge, is there – you've got to demonstrate results and he's getting this pressure. And he has two alternatives, right? He's got – okay, show me some metrics. Show me that you're improving in your area.

On one hand, he could take the substantial weight of resources, boots on the ground, money, equipment, technology that he has, and it can use it himself and take the lead and push the needle forward, and get it pretty far in his year that's there.

Or, on the other hand, he could go to the Afghans first and focus on their development, do everything through the Afghans, but he knows that the mission may not even be accomplished, and if it is, it's going to take three or four times as long. And it's going to be extremely frustrating. And he may be judged for failure in his area because of his willingness to go through the Afghans like that. It's a rare battalion commander sometimes that makes that decisions and says, no, I'm going to focus on this.

So in some ways, the drawdown of forces can act as a forcing function, as a catalyst to greater cooperation to force us, because at that point, you've really got – you don't have enough people to do it yourself. You can't just say, hey, I'm doing this patrol and I'm going to drag these Afghans along as an afterthought. You really have to ask them, hey, what do you think we should here? What's the best way to go forward, because I can't do it myself anymore? So that's just – I think there's an opportunity there but it can be squandered if we're not careful about the way we move forward.

MR. CHANDRASEKARAN: And my last question for you. We've been very focused on training and fielding Afghan infantrymen. Is that sufficient for them to win their war? I mean, it strikes me that a critical piece of this equation involves the rear echelon guys, support guys, logisticians, et cetera. Aren't they in some ways just as important as the shooters? And where do we stand on that critical piece of equation?

MAJOR LUJAN: Yes. Absolutely. And this is one of the harder challenges that are over there. It's just – it's much easier to train infantrymen. It's much easier to put

people through and teach them how to shoot a rifle and walk patrols. It is way harder to train and retain mechanics and medics because, think about it, right?

You have these Afghans like we talked about, that are four, five years in southern Afghanistan getting shot at every day, living in really tough, really bad conditions away from their family, making an okay wage, but then you send them to Kabul, put them through training to be mechanics, or medics, or whatever may be, they finish that course and then they know that they're going to go back to their unit and basically make the same amount of money and face the same dangers, or, they can go to the civilian workforce and make more as a mechanic in Kabul, right, and see their family. It's very hard to retain people under that kind of environment. And that's something that we need to put a lot more emphasis on.

And I'll just leave you one last story. If there's one place that I think we saw that was a potential bellwether for what we're going to see in the next couple of years, it was a place called Zabul province. And this is – we had the fortune really to spend – and honor – to spend time with the first two independent battalions, kandaks, in Afghanistan that were out there. And these battalions were basically operating without coalition assistance. They were out there leading their own operations, and in a place where the Taliban was really working to get the area back, right? This is a very important area for the Taliban strategic.

And the thing that we saw was that what hurt them and what made it so difficult was not the fact that they weren't brave or they weren't committed or they didn't have infantrymen in the field. It was the presence of those enablers, of those mechanics and medics because, ultimately, these guys were out on their checkpoints. They were out during patrols every day, but it's hard to do patrols when your trucks are breaking down in the motor pool, right, because they don't have break pads and your logistic system doesn't work.

It's hard when you can't get people to come out to remove IEDs or treat a casualty, and so it takes away your freedom of movement. And as a result, you end up with sort of islands in the stream phenomenon where you get – the Taliban's able to encroach upon these little isolated outposts, and the point where we might be facing a situation where the Taliban is able to actually start overrunning some of these places. Then I think it's not going to be necessarily the infantrymen that drive that, but those enablers, logisticians, the medics, the fire support folks. That's really the long pole in the tent for us going forward in the next year.

MR. CHANDRASEKARAN: Before I end, I was going to joke that the 20 minutes afforded for the sole segment on Afghanistan at the conference shows us where the war really ranks in Washington. (Laughter.)

But before you guys fire off indignant tweets, let me know. And I will admit this is a purely shameless plug that CNAS will be hosting an Afghanistan-specific event in just 13 days, on the evening on Tuesday, June 26th. I'll be back here with Steve Coll to discuss my new book on the Afghan war, Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan. There will be some stimulating discussion I hope. And more importantly, there will be cocktails. For more information, you can go to the CNAS website.

Fernando, who took those wonderful pictures over our heads, is going to be heading back to Afghanistan in a couple of months to put what he talked about here into action.

Please join me in thanking him for his insightful remarks here and wishing him a safe and productive tour. (Applause.) Thank you.