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Transcript

Is Peaceful Political Transition in Afghanistan Possible?

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Michael Keating:

Welcome to Chatham House. My name is Michael Keating, I'm a senior consulting fellow here, and prior to joining Chatham House I was in Afghanistan for a couple of years with the UN until November.

We have three very distinguished speakers. Let me say we did try and get the gender balance slightly more balanced, but for various reasons it didn't work out. But I'm really delighted to have three great speakers today.

First, on my right, is Dr Rob Johnson, who is going to address the issue of how the departure of the international military will affect security for Afghans and what's the best way to maintain security after 2014. Rob is the director of the Changing Character of War Programme at Oxford University. His research interests include conflicts among people in Afghanistan, strategy operations, insurgency and counter-insurgency, and you are a specialist adviser to the British, Danish, American and Afghan armed forces, only, on security, stabilization and transition. He's also the author of *The Afghan Way of War*, and used to be with the British Army.

On his right is Matt Waldman, who has worked on Afghanistan since 2005, first as Oxfam's head of policy in Afghanistan. He's now a fellow in the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He's an analyst and was also a UN official in Afghanistan until about June 2011, involved in promoting dialogue and conflict resolution with the Taliban. His background is as a lawyer, and he's worked in foreign affairs and defence as an adviser to the UK and European parliaments.

On my left is Jawed Nader from Ghazni Province in Afghanistan; extensive experience of working with civil society, international and Afghan, as well as government. He's the director of the London-based British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group – BAAG – and he was previously director of the Afghanistan Land Authority in the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture and advocacy manager with the Afghan Civil Society Forum.

So welcome, and thank you all very much for doing this. So if I may ask Rob to kick off, on how the departure of the international military will affect security for Afghans, and what's the best way to maintain security beyond 2014. And may I also ask – abuse my privilege as the chair – do you think we have an over-militarized view of security in Afghanistan?

Robert Johnson:

First of all thank you very much for such a warm introduction Michael, and such a challenging question to get it started. Let me say, the first difficulty we have here is about what models we are thinking about, what trends we think we're identifying, how selective we want to be about previous histories here.

Because so often when people start talking about security, the very first thing that people do is reach for examples historically and say: 'ah, it's a repeat of something we know about Afghan history.' There's a wonderful Pashtun proverb which says that 'you can swallow a rough bone, but once it's in your bowels it tends to cut up your guts', and I'm very grateful to those who pointed out that quote to me in the past.

That of course is an indication of how emotive this piece of history is. We know that bits of Afghan history are used very selectively, and our understanding of security is based entirely on a Western model of what is security, as I'm sure we'll hear from Jawed. One of the interesting things about security for many Afghans is that food security, water security, their family's security, other than the physical security being provided by Western forces, is what matters – so let's get that said first of all. I think the other caveat, very quickly, is that we are dominated at the moment in all our analyses by very short-term perspectives. We tend to be only seeing – even when we talk about post-2014, really it seems to me that we're talking about the present still. I think if we're going to be realistic about looking at security post-2014, we need to be thinking very long-term indeed. Again, I think this is where our colleagues in development have an advantage.

The stability and equilibrium I think we're looking for *are* in sight, actually, but a long way down the road. I think the short-termism of instability is still going to be with us. Let me just also make one other important remark about this too: we tend to see security as an issue only in Western terms. We forget quite often what Afghans are currently doing about their own security. There is a great deal of evidence that there is collusion going on – if you want to use that word – between Afghan security forces and those people you might think are local people or indeed, insurgents. People are hedging for the future and increasingly committing for the future. They are negotiating at a local level already for local stability and local security, regardless of what the West thinks it's doing in terms of transfer of power.

But I've been asked to talk – your question is very much about two things: one is the ISAF departure and the other one is really the ways and means in which we provide security. Let me just quickly deal with those. A lot of focus

at the moment is on the capability of the Afghan National Security Forces. A lot of the ISAF material that's coming out is about whether they've got the right logistics, the right transport, the right equipment, the weapons and the pay and so on and so forth. Really frankly, we should be talking about cohesion of the Afghan security forces – that is what matters the most. That's based on things like leadership – professionalization of leadership – on morale, on commitment, on the competing loyalties within the Afghan policy or the Afghan community writ large. So that's something hopefully we'll pick up on with the questions.

There are obviously many risks and many opportunities. The risk I think we are currently missing about security is: what happens to those who are currently, for example, the drivers of a lot of the haulage firms, which are bringing a lot of food and equipment into Afghanistan for the benefit of ISAF? What happens, for example, in the next two years when they decide this is no longer in their interest to continue this sort of thing? That will seriously hamper the idea of transition to an Afghan National Security lead because the Western powers will be trying to find ways of protecting their own people as they come out. A major risk factor though is increasing disobedience and desertion I think we'll see within Afghan security forces – that is a major risk factor. For Afghans, opportunism of course: opportunity for the acquisition of property, for goods, for exploitation of those who they consider to be weaker than themselves as they try to hoard and acquire material; increasing hoarding, more generally – not just of money as we're seeing at the moment, but also a lot of other goods and services. We're also seeing the replacement at a local level of weak GROA, as they call it – government of [the Republic of] Afghanistan officials – by those who have got muscle, those who can provide security. And that may mean the Afghan security forces.

Let me lastly deal with this issue of: what are the ways and means, what are the ways forward? I think we have to first of all set very clear objectives. I think there has been an absence of clarity about what objectives there have been, and it may be that if the priority is the stabilization of Afghanistan, then that is stabilization we may have to consider now without the current system of governance in Afghanistan. If the [Hamid] Karzai government is as bankrupt as we think it might possibly be, then we need to start planning for a future that does not have that government in place.

Secondly I think we need to be honest about genuine Afghan solutions. There's been a lot of talk of 'Afghanizing' security, and that's usually around this word: the Afghan National Security Forces. But I think we need to seriously think about genuine Afghan solutions, which will mean

compromises. We talk a lot about power-sharing, we comfort ourselves with that expression; I think the reality is, historical precedent is, that actually the moment you try to commit to some sort of power-sharing is the period of greatest instability and violence.

Finally, just a couple of words then about: what are the means, other than this prioritization of genuine Afghan solutions? At the closing stage of the Iraq War there was a lot of emphasis on private security contractors. They of course will go where the money is; if that money is not there, they will not be there. There has been a great deal of antagonism between private security companies and the Afghan government, and I think that makes it unlikely that that's a solution. The Afghan security forces themselves I think will need to focus on holding urban areas and concentrating on the borders, and what we may have to contemplate – and this may be an outrageous thing to say, but I'm going to say it because that's the thing that one has to do as a thinker, to think the unthinkable – is that we may have to start licensing the poachers as gamekeepers: maybe seriously bring on board, at a local level, local people providing their own security. And that may mean bringing those people who have formerly been insurgents into some sort of licensed local security force. The historical precedent for that of course is that the Afghan security forces traditionally and historically always were a mixed force, both of regular and localized militia-like security apparatus, and I think that's the thing we probably need to start looking at. I'm not going to say anything about Pakistan because I think Matt may well want to say something about that perhaps at some stage.

So the concluding points are – let me just conclude in my minute! Prediction clearly is extremely difficult. As a historian, it goes against my DNA to try and make a prediction, but I think we have to be extraordinarily cautious about trying to say 'in 2020 it'll all look like this, won't it?' And as we're confident that we'll find in the media at the moment, people predicting disaster and so on.

Afghans are the best polity I know for local negotiations and finding local accommodations. I think we should have more faith that perhaps now, more than ever, is the greatest opportunity to negotiate a settlement because we've reached an impasse in the security environment. No one party in Afghanistan, including ISAF, has sufficient strength to dictate a solution. Seems to me a growing opportunity now for that sort of talk, and I think the long-term solutions – we should keep in mind all the time the solutions that go out to 2020, 2025; not trying to judge 2014 and 2015 by the standards of what's going on now in 2013. I think that's very important. I'll stop there because I think there is lots we can talk about.

Michael Keating:

Great, that's very helpful. We do need to come back to the question 'is peaceful political transition in Afghanistan possible?' and I hope that our questions will focus on that. Jawed, you are going to address the issue of the sustainability of development support for Afghanistan and whether more can be done with less. My observation would be that something like 90 per cent of the revenues available to Afghanistan are provided by the international community, whether for development activities or the military. These are going to decrease – how can it be sustainable?

Jawed Nader:

A very good question. Thank you for the introduction, too. It's a pleasure to be here among you today. I'd like to start with the story of an acquaintance. I thought his honesty was a little shaky, but he did tell me that in 2006 he worked with the army at the national army headquarters in southern Afghanistan. They needed rope, and he was sent to the nearest city, Kandahar, to fetch some 400 metres of rope. What he did was he mistakenly put a zero at the end of the final sum, so the rope that could cost him £300 brought him a bonanza of £2,700 more. Now I can't really say if he told me the truth, but he went on saying that after two years he quit the job and started an automobile showroom in Kabul – which was very disappointing.

This is only one example of how things can be mishandled if it is handled by unprofessionals [*sic*]. Probably if you send aid workers to battlefields, there will be even more problems. Hence it's not surprising that after 60 billion [*sic*] of international aid since 2001 in Afghanistan, Afghanistan still remains one of the poorest countries in the world with one of the worst development indicators. Sadly corruption and aid ineffectiveness is only part of the bigger weakness.

The question that I'm asked: the short answer to that is it really depends on the myriad of national and international actors, as well as what we aim to achieve beyond 2014. But the longer version of the answer is as follows. Afghanistan, since its ostensible establishment as a nation in the mid-18th century, has always been dependent on some sort of aid or external resources. At the beginning, they went to the neighbouring countries and took it with the power of sword, but when more sophisticated powers arrived in the region they had to seek for help. That trend continued with the Russians, and it still continues today. The only major difference is that Afghanistan is more dependent today. The dependency of Afghanistan is greater.

It has some of the most hostile geographic features, Afghanistan. It is a predominantly agriculture-based economy, but only 12 per cent of the land is arable and only 0.2 per cent of Afghan land is under permanent crop cover. It is an arid and utterly mountainous country, where just below the optimum level of rain and snow will cause an immediate drought and just above the optimum level will cause floods. So from making roads to establishing and building electricity dams, all factors aside, geographical factors make the cost per unit in Afghanistan greater than any country in the region. This said, it's hard to imagine that any government in Afghanistan can sustain without substantial international assistance.

But the more nuanced question is how long this international assistance should be there, and how much should it be there for the Afghan government to stand on its own feet. In either case, it is necessary to enable the Afghan government to take the lead role of the development agenda in the country. The figures so far show that though it has been an intention of the international community to do that, in practice it has not been the highest concern. A study by Lydia Poole shows that civilian aid during 2002–09 was only 9.3 per cent of overall international assistance, whereas the military aid was 84.8 per cent. Only a minor proportion of that was spent through the government of Afghanistan. There are two major reasons given: one is the low absorptive and execution ability of the Afghan government, but also the rampant corruption. They may seem valid, but they have not so far helped creation of the Afghan ability to take the lead in development. The sustainability of support to Afghan development also hinges on the mood of Western capitals, to be honest, that are more determined by the political realities in their own capitals and not much with the realities in the Afghanistan scene.

Figures show that \$60 billion were pledged so far by the international community after 2013, but only \$39 billion were committed by 2009, so there is a big difference. Out of that, only \$20.6 billion were actually dispersed; out of the top ten donors percentage-wise, the US, which is the top-most pledger, is the lowest disperser of the aid. These issues however do not negate the substantive progress that Afghanistan has made. From access to healthcare and education to roads and infrastructure, Afghanistan has taken gigantic strides. The National Solidarity Programme, a flagship programme of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, is a good example of effective and participatory community development. It's also a good example of NGO and government partnership. We may need to have similar politically correct and technically sound national projects in the future.

On a positive note, the drawdown of international troops may also be an opportunity for development in Afghanistan. It may make a big difference if the savings from the military assistance are allocated to development projects. In the meantime, low military intervention in development will also make the Afghan government and international development actors more focused; a focus that is direly needed given the development challenges in Afghanistan are real and they are big. Afghanistan at the moment is one of the worst places to be a woman: every two hours a mother dies, and in almost half of the Afghan districts there is no female teacher in the schools. Large parts of the peaceful Afghanistan remain too unattractive to receive international help, the predominantly agriculture-based economy in Afghanistan is highly weather-dependent, and a lack of jobs only adds to the number of big populations that are internally displaced and refugees.

To conclude, development in Afghanistan needs a breakaway from short-term, quick-impact and quick fix projects, towards more integrated, coherent and national development programmes. Such development will be more effective, but it may not be less costly. Coming back to the story of my acquaintance – just out of curiosity and to make the conclusion more interesting – I gave him a call this morning to ask how his business was going. After a year of the automobile showroom, he started a guesthouse business too. But both of those businesses are running in the red at the moment, because Afghans have stopped buying new cars, and also the mushrooming of other guest houses means that he doesn't have a lot of foreign guests. Thank you.

Michael Keating:

Thank you very much Jawed. So it sounds to me, and we'll come back to this, that you're saying that peaceful political transition in part depends on a continuation of subsidies to the Afghan state and their judicious use. Is that correct?

Jawed Nader:

That's correct.

Michael Keating:

So Matt, let me turn to you. You're going to address the issue of whether reconciliation with the Taliban is possible, and how, if it is possible, it could be achieved.

Matt Waldman:

Thanks Michael for such an easy question! I think – the short answer is I think it is possible, but I think it will be very difficult and will take a considerable amount of time. I'll just if I may identify four factors as to why I think it is possible, another four as to why I think it will be difficult.

Firstly, I think withdrawal of foreign forces actually gives rise to some opportunities in terms of reconciliation. There are many reasons why insurgents fight, but I think one of the most pervasive, in fact one of the biggest sources of motivation for the Taliban, is the presence of foreign forces. I think actually many Talibs labour under misapprehensions as to why foreign forces are in their country. They see them as invaders and for purposes other than those of to generate stability and promote development and so on. So I think that's a major driver and of course foreign forces are now withdrawing from Afghanistan.

Secondly, I think it's clear that a significant number of senior leaders of the Taliban are interested in the possibilities of a negotiated outcome to the conflict. Let me just say why I think they are interested. Firstly they're war-weary, and they've suffered very significant losses. They're fatigued from the conflict; they face a lot of pressure both within their movement and from Afghan communities who are fed up with the war. I think they resent the exile that they suffer and the manipulation, as they see it, by Pakistan for its own purposes, geopolitically. I think they're uneasy about the future, they're concerned about the regeneration of an anti-Taliban coalition that is backed by the West and regional states.

They also, I think, this group of leaders, recognize the constraints that they face. In other words, Afghans have changed in their aspirations and their expectations since 2001; they expect the state to do an awful lot in terms of services, whether it's education or health, or basic freedoms and the right to vote. I think that many of these what one might call 'thinking Talibs' realize that they cannot go back to the 1990s. Indeed, I think in light of developments in the Arab world more broadly, they know that they cannot seek to be a legitimate, credible power by seeking to impose an autocratic regime on the people of Afghanistan. In fact the final point I'd make is – and I think this is

often missed – that many of these figures crave legitimacy, they crave recognition, as they did the 1990s actually, although they didn't get it. I think that actually perhaps gives the international community a little bit of leverage there.

I think the third reason why I think reconciliation with the Taliban may be possible is that the United States now is seriously interested in the possibilities of a negotiated outcome. And that did not really happen I think in terms of broad collective policy until the end of 2010–early 2011. I think we've moved away now from the over-simplistic conflation of the Taliban and Al-Qaida. I think that helps in terms of the possibilities for reconciliation.

The fourth point is I think there is some indication that there may be a degree of convergence between some of the major parties to this conflict. I think most of the major parties want to avoid a civil war, and actually are concerned about their interests were that to take place. I think there might be a degree of convergence from some of the parties on, say, issues such as law and order, or national sovereignty. And indeed there are some indications that the Taliban are reconsidering some of their policies that were deeply unpopular through their regime.

Why will it be unlikely to happen in the near future? I think, first of all, the deep mistrust which exists between the parties to the conflict, which is obviously partly historical and partly derives from recent history where certain moves were made towards reconciliation but were not meant sincerely, in some cases were designed to divide or undermine the Taliban, rather than to reach a settlement. I think each of the parties doubts the seriousness of the others in terms of their interest in a political settlement.

Second factor: I think that on each side there are elements that are opposed to a negotiated outcome. I think you see that on the Taliban side where there are hardliners who see this as a betrayal of the jihad. I think on the government side there are compromises there that many figures do not want to make. And in terms of Pakistan, it may have concerns that it would lose its leverage if a process moves forward without them.

Third point: there are procedural problems with the way the process has moved forward so far. One is the fact that it is very public, and I think that has led each of the parties – as they make moves, they're having to look behind their backs to justify what they're doing to their constituents. And that is very hard when, in the case of the Taliban, they've always denied that they would ever engage with the United States or the Afghan government. And of course that is now happening, slowly, sometimes informally, sometimes

confidentially, but because it's quite a public process, that means this constant justification actually is holding the parties back. I think another procedural, process problem if you like, is the absence of a mediator. I think given the complexity of this conflict, the depth of mistrust between the parties, I think you do need, if possible, an organization or a state or individuals who can try to bring some order to this process.

The fourth point I would make is that the Taliban – there are certainly issues where I think it raises very grave concerns on the part of parts of the Afghan population, particularly if you like in terms of social affairs and in terms of the role of women, and in terms of basic freedoms. I think there are many in Afghanistan who are concerned about what the policies of the Taliban actually are, and I think that will make it very difficult to move forward.

I have one minute left to tell you how this all will be solved! Three points: I regret the fact that so far in the conflict there has not been a discussion between the parties about the real issues that are driving the conflict forward. In other words what the interests of the parties are, what they want and whether there's a sufficient degree of convergence to really think about a negotiated outcome. And I think the sooner that we can bring that dialogue about, the better. I think, as I indicated earlier, if it was possible for there to be mediation of a kind, to try to avoid some of the misunderstandings that have been apparent in the process so far, I think that could help.

And finally, I also think that reconciliation with the Taliban is necessary for stability, but insufficient. There has to be a much bigger process that reaches out to many different elements of Afghan society to try to bring them into a process, ensure that if there was any outcome, it certainly reflects the aspirations of the country as a whole and not merely the leaders – in some cases one might argue discredited leaders – of some of the parties. I think it also, by the same token, needs to be part of a regional process. It cannot stand alone; it needs the backing I think of Afghanistan's neighbours.

Michael Keating:

Thank you very much indeed, three terrific presentations there.