



Virtual Event | Can We Prevent Further Calamity in Afghanistan?

TRANSCRIPT

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- Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, *Hudson Japan Chair*
- Robert Greenway, *Adjunct Fellow, Hudson Institute*
- Ambassador Husain Haqqani, *Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute*

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Nadia Schadlow:

Welcome everyone. It's my pleasure this afternoon to introduce and to have a conversation with three of the country's most respected experts on issues related to Afghanistan, as well as the broader Middle East, as well as U.S. Foreign policy. The title of our panel today is, "Can We Prevent Further Calamity in Afghanistan?" And with us today, we have three speakers. We have General H. R. McMaster, who is the Japan Chair at the Hudson Institute and who was, as most of you know, the 26th national security advisor of the United States of America. We have Ambassador Husain Haqqani, who's a senior fellow and director for South and Central Asia also at the Hudson Institute. He was Pakistan's ambassador to the United States from 2008 to 2011. And we have Rob Greenway, who's an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute and the executive director of the Abraham Accords Institute of Peace. Rob was also a senior director on the national security council and he overlapped when I was there as well as H.R.

I'm a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. I'm a former deputy national security advisor for strategy and I'm the moderator of the group, but I hope to generate a conversation as well with everyone, make sure everyone stays on track, and let's go. So I'm going to start with the group, giving everyone a chance to provide some analysis about what happened. But I think it's very important to look forward, right? It might not be a hopeful picture, but we've read over the past 10 days a great deal of analysis about what's happened, about the humanitarian catastrophe, about the geo-strategic catastrophe that's really underway. I'd like your analysis of that, your assessment. But as I said, then we can shift to what we might do to mitigate some of the humanitarian, the unfolding disaster there that's still unfolding and what we might do to offset a sense of great decline that many analysts are feeling today as we watch what's happened over the past 10 days.

So why don't I start with Ambassador Haqqani? Why don't you give me a sense, a little bit about what you've been seeing, your sense of what happened. I know you've written a lot about that, but a sense of what you're seeing today on the ground, and then I'll go to H.R. and then to Rob.

Ambassador Husain Haqqani:

Thank you very much, Nadia. We must bear in mind that in Afghanistan, the United States went originally to fight Al-Qaeda and associated terrorist groups. Those groups are not finished. In fact, the return of the Taliban is being portrayed by them as a great for their narrative. We drove out the Soviet Union in 1989, now we've driven out the Americans. The people of Afghanistan who we had promised that we will give them a new future, they're panicking and are worried because they know who the Taliban really are. So what went wrong is a debate that we will have for a long time. I think that the category of mistakes falls into mistakes of the last 20 days, mistakes of the last two years and mistakes of the last 20 years, and I don't think one panel will suffice to cover all of them.

Right now, we have to try and mitigate the disaster that is already taking place. So I would say that the first step towards that would be to recognize that it is wrong to say that Afghanistan did not matter and does not matter. People can have an argument about how long we should have stayed, what resources we should have put in, but it is totally wrong to be dismissive as the president of the United States has occasionally done that we are done, we are moving out. There will be consequences, whether it is trying to provide refuge to all the people who are coming out of Afghanistan or just to get Americans out. The second thing that I think is important as we move forward is to try and make an assessment of worst

case scenarios. There are several thousand Americans in Afghanistan, many of whom not connect to the government.

Some of them, Christian missionaries in small parts of Afghanistan, some of them are potential hostages for extremist groups. You must remember that there is at least one American hostage that the so-called Haqqani network is already holding, a gentleman by the name of Mark Frerichs from Illinois. And during the course of the negotiations, when people like me try to remind the American negotiators to bring him up, the answer was, we know they have him and they will eventually release him. The U.S., Of course, made a huge mistake in making a distinction between the Haqqani network and the Taliban. One was declared a terrorist organization, the main Taliban weren't because, beginning with the Obama administration, there was an assumption that we will eventually have a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. And now the Haqqani network is running Kabul and their behavior from the past is not particularly good.

So we have to be prepared for worst case scenarios like hostage taking and what to do about it. Third, we have to have a realistic assessment of what we can retrieve from our long involvement in Afghanistan. Who do we have on ground who can be our friend? Still, there is a resistance that has started taking shape. That resistance is definitely a potential partner and friend of the United States. The Central Asian republics that border Afghanistan are worried about the spillover, but they're also concerned about Russia. There are four governments that are still fully involved inside Afghanistan and have open embassies; China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan. Three of them are openly adversarial towards the United States. And the fourth, Pakistan, is the only one that has acted in a way that has been detrimental to American interests, but has never openly declared hostility or adversarial attitude towards the U.S.

So we need to try and figure out how to have a frank conversation with the Pakistanis that you for 20 years may have had a difference in outlook on what you wanted in Afghanistan than we did. You have had what you wanted. Now moving forward, what can you do to make sure that the kind of threat that brought us into Afghanistan before 9/11 does not take shape again. And part of it would involve holding Pakistan responsible. Instead of letting them have their cake and eat it too, to be able to have influence with the Taliban and yet turn around and say, we have influence, but not control and get away without much responsibility. It's time to try and figure that one out. Next, we have to also think about what we are going to do about Russian, Chinese and Iranian influence coming out of Afghanistan.

And lastly, when we talk about over the horizon monitoring of terrorist activities that might emanate from Afghanistan and the region, I think we have to have a realistic assessment of what capabilities do we really have and if those capabilities aren't enough, what new capabilities can we develop?

Nadia Schadlow:

Thank you so much, Ambassador Haqqani. I'll now turn to H.R., someone who I think has had some experience in speaking with his Pakistani counterparts, but actually that could be the focus of a whole different program. We're actually going to try to stick to some of these broader issues. So Husain, you brought up some really important points about what we can do going forward, especially in terms of other powers in the region. I do want to get to that, but H.R., I'd like you to talk a little bit about what you're seeing now on the ground, because we're hearing in the media that things are going okay with the evacuations, depending on who you listen to. But unfortunately, the White House continues to

maintain that things are proceeding with the evacuations, that people are getting to the airports. My sense is that you have a different perspective, and I thought maybe you could talk a little bit about that and then obviously touch on some of the broader issues. Thank you.

H. R. McMaster:

Well, thanks, Nadia. Well, just to set the record straight, I think, I mean, what you've heard from the administration are just falsehoods based on maybe wishful thinking and continued self-delusion, or I think maybe just trying to mitigate the disaster associated with the American people recognizing how poorly this has been executed. And the problem is simply one of scale and access to get people out. There are far more people to get out. These are American citizens and those who helped us who are in grave danger of retribution from the Taliban. Then there are going to be flights on the timeline that the administration has either imposed on itself or a timeline that has been imposed on them by the Taliban in the surrender agreement with the Taliban. And so what's sad about this is the lack of urgency that we are attributing to ourselves in this case.

It's quite clear what has to happen. There has to be greater access to a staging area. The airport itself is not sufficient. So now of course in recent days, you've seen that the perimeter is going to be pushed out a little bit, but then there's the constraint of maximum on the ground, how many aircraft can be on the ground at a time. And it's really just crazy, Nadia, that we gave up access to airports and we pulled our military out before we got this evacuation done. It's really inexcusable. Your question is, what to do now. What we should be doing, whether we have the will to do it is another issue, is expand the airport operation to the civilian side of the airport, to let not only more military flights, but many, many more charter flights arrive, flights that have been organized by allies and partners and individual private citizens.

You've seen a tremendous outpouring of support for trying to mitigate this catastrophe. But really what should happen is a reopening of Bagram Air Base and we should go back in. We know how to do that, by the way, Nadia, very quickly. And then to use that as a safe area and the routes to it as a safe area to process people, and then of course extend this deadline which is rumored, some people are saying that the administration already is going to scale back operations in three days or so. So I think that's what has to happen to mitigate the disaster. And I think that's the first, I think, topic that you want to talk about in this session is what can we control? What can we do now? But I think as Husain said, I think there are maybe four other areas besides mitigating the humanitarian disaster that we do still have some agency. Husain already talks about it.

What more can be done against jihadist terrorists around Afghanistan from the outside in with Pakistan? So I think that's an area. And also sustaining efforts against jihadist terrorists who want to commit mass murder against us. There's debate in Congress now, Nadia, about reducing or eliminating the authorization of the use of military force. That would be a double disaster in connection with your jihadist terrorists. A third area, so besides mitigating humanitarian catastrophe and intensifying efforts against jihadist terrorists would be to counter the Taliban narrative that they won and then to isolate them from international support. Do not recognize them as Ambassador Haley has urged us, but also isolate them financially and diplomatically and make it clear, the Taliban didn't defeat us, we defeated ourselves, but we're not going to accept a terrorist regime that can then use the establishment of Islamic Emirate to bolster other jihadist terrorist organizations.

And then I think in that connection, we have to move towards supporting the opposition to the Taliban. It might be some time before we can do that, but as Ambassador Haqqani has said, you already have Amrullah Saleh, who is a real fighter, assembling people in the punchier, which could be connected to Bagram, for example. And I think it'll become clear to us as we see more and more of the humanitarian catastrophe associated with this terrorist organization imposing brutal Sharia on the Afghan people. There'll be more and more of a call to support opposition. And then fifth, and this is going to sound crazy, Nadia, but we have to prepare to go back because just as the withdrawal of our forces from Iraq in December 2011 did not end that so-called endless war, this is not an endless war, it's an endless jihad against us.

So I think we have to prepare to go back because as Husain said, over the horizon, counter-terrorism just doesn't work. It's a pipe dream.

Nadia Schadlow:

Thanks, H.R.. Rob, I'd like to hear your perspectives on where we are, and especially from your vantage point from the Middle East, what are you hearing from your friends, from our allies in the region? How are they interpreting events there? Thank you.

Rob Greenway:

Thanks, Nadia. I appreciate the opportunity to join you and Ambassador Haqqani and General McMaster. Again, it's great to see you all. What I've heard is twofold. First is a strong desire to help support and assist the evacuation efforts. And we've seen a number of countries, partners and allies alike, many of whom we rebuffed at the beginning of this administration. I think now we're finding why they're integral to our interests in the region. And the good news is they're coming forward to provide support and assistance as best they can. But as already been pointed out, the situation is very difficult, and it's not entirely clear exactly how they can best do it. Also, I think at the same time, there's a little bit of understandable empathy with the predicament we've described. I think they all, as many did, could predict exactly what was likely to occur. They would recognize that this is entirely preventable. We've gotten to the point where, after 20 years, we'd had a reduced military presence that was sufficient to safeguard our interest and to continue to prosecute counter-terrorism efforts. But I think the frustration is overall probably the greatest characteristic of the response ever.

At the same time, I think they're waiting for instructions. So as General McMaster and Ambassador Haqqani pointed out, there's a great deal left to be done. If, as I think we'd all agree, we need to develop and execute an expanded plan for evacuation, they're going to be an integral component of it as they are now, but probably at a greater scale. I'd argue we can't do this alone. As the withdrawal apparently was executed, we need closer collaboration with our partners, which was supposed to be a hallmark of the current administration. I think we need to not only expand the efforts, but we need to expand our infrastructure, as General McMaster pointed out, in the region, certainly to support evacuation, to support counter-terrorism, but also to prepare for the potential return. And I think within, we need to expand the infrastructure. Bagram is one of many options where we can, I think, and may have to establish a necessary bridgehead to make contact with the thousands of isolated personnel, both American allied and Afghan, that are still in the wake of this precipitous withdrawal.

I think we need to reintroduce forces into the region, which we've been pulling out consistently to restore and re-establish our deterrence, and to buy down risk. Because right now, we're probably unmeasurable in terms of the risk associated with the region, not just Afghanistan, but the rest of the region, because we've increased the provocation really, and the risk of escalation as a whole. And so I think absent the resources, the next steps are going to be not only difficult, they're going to be potentially impossible. I think we need to do, as General McMaster said, start to impose costs on the Taliban. And I think we need to do this in a number of ways, financially, diplomatically, and even militarily, as General McMaster suggested. That's going to require some detailed planning coordination. That needs to start now. But absent that, we really have even less leverage than we have at the moment.

When your only alternative is to negotiate with the world's largest terrorist organization, now in control of the largest sanctuary something the size of Texas, that we've armed with some \$83 billion worth of equipment, I think it's time for us to start regenerating necessary in order to get a better outcome. And I think, as General McMaster pointed out and Ambassador Haqqani, that international consensus necessary. While there'll be a lot of theater in New York at the soon to be General Assembly here in September, the meeting of international leaders gives us an opportunity, I think, to begin the process of coordinating that more fully. It can't wait until then, but I think that's the point in which we can demonstrate international position to start to isolate the Taliban as General McMaster suggested.

And I think too, it's important to recall that we need to sustain our presence in Iraq and Syria at the same time. We don't need another withdrawal. We don't need another precipitous collapse, but we're dangerously close. Prime Minister Imad Khamis left Washington with an agreement to withdraw combat forces, and that's our counter-terrorism offensive capability. Absent that, our position in Iraq and Syria could become untenable. And that would unwind Syria as well, which is completely dependent on our Iraqi infrastructure. All the while, Lebanon is swirling toward the abyss. We don't need simultaneous crises on two or three fronts, but that's exactly what we're facing. So in the coming days, it's going to be essential for us to shore up our presence where it remains and to increase our posture so that we can keep it.

Nadia Schadlow:

Thanks, Rob. So would it be fair to say, and thinking through, all of you have touched on some of the issues, but would it be fair to say that if we don't see an extension of, I think, as you put it, HR, the self-imposed August 31st deadline, that really is going to give us a sense of fundamentally where the administration is in terms of their commitment to try to help get American citizens and Afghans who supported the United States out, that will essentially be an important signal or an important indicator, should I say? Or is that being too tough on them? HR, Husain, I see you nodding.

H. R. McMaster:

Yeah. No, I think you're exactly right about that. That's a really critical test now to see if the administration does have the will to do what's right, or if it is going to be limited by, apparently, a surrender agreement to the Taliban. And if we don't demonstrate that will, I think there are going to be many us citizens who won't make it out, as well as countless Afghans who will be a tremendous risk. One of the things that is stomach turning these days, and Husain, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this,

is some of the reporting that you hear that demonstrates how much better the Taliban had gotten at PR. Even as they're going house to house, even as they are reimposing a brutal form of governance and eliminating any rights that women have achieved since 2001, they're trying to put on this more benign face. And I think they're doing so so they can just consolidate power and then certainly return to that same brutality.

Ambassador Husain Haqqani:

Will and timing are both important. I think that deadlines that are imposed on yourself are counter productive. All deadlines should be subject to circumstances on the ground. They shouldn't be arbitrary deadlines. And that's why we are here, because we agreed to an arbitrary deadline for withdrawal in the Doha Peace Accord, which was not a peace accord. I always called it a withdrawal accord. The second part of it is also unrealistic expectations. And as far as the PR part is concerned, HR, the Taliban seemed to have learned from the best. After all, they have been hosted next door by people who, for 20 years, have been telling Americans that we are not hosting them, and have managed to do it with a straight face. And now, Prime Minister, Imran Khan, says that the shackles of slavery have been broken next door.

So anybody who has PR skills is not necessarily a good thing for America, we must understand and our media must understand. Don't put the best Taliban faces on air, and don't give them the ability to lie without pushing back. Unfortunately, a lot of that has happened in the last few years, beginning with Sirajuddin Haqqani's op-ed in the New York Times. This is a man who was a mass murderer with close ties to Al Qaeda. The UN's latest report says he still maintains close ties to Al Qaeda. And yet, he was able to pretend that all he wanted was peace in Afghanistan.

Nadia Schadlow:

And he's given an outlet in the New York Times. They're a lot tougher on a lot of other people, getting op-eds into The Times. Rob, in terms of specific allies in the Middle East on who could work with us on imposing costs on the Taliban or leverage or working together to cut funding off, are you seeing opportunities there in terms of your contacts?

Rob Greenway:

I think so. I think it's all contingent upon our demonstration of resolve. Because of course, they're looking to gauge our commitment. If they think that we're not willing to take the steps necessary, we can hardly expect others to do the same. But to your point, I think exactly to this general thrust of getting international isolation of the Taliban and restricting all of the resources required to a certain extent. And the Gulf states provide an opportunity to do it. The Emirates, first and foremost, I think, is the region's primary financial hub. For both Pakistan and for Afghanistan, the processing of financial transactions through the Emirates, remittances and otherwise, is essential. And so I think there is an enormous opportunity for us to exercise oversight and to start to restrict the flow of capital, which is going to be required to keep the state of Afghanistan flowing. Now, look, terrorism and domestic repression is cheap, but it's not free. It's going to require some time.

The Taliban are going to find it's extremely difficult to administer essential services to a population of some 38 million people. And I think ultimately, we can either abet that or we can restrict it and we can

complicate it, which would increase our leverage. So there's no question, I think, that we have the ability. I think the question comes back, again, of whether or not we're going to commit to this particular strategy and enlist the support of our partners. But financially, I think we do hold a lot of cards, and I think we have a great deal of partnerships that can be exploited on this basis and otherwise. And I think too that we've elevated the position of the Taliban in negotiations and at the same time dismissed the government of Afghanistan we sought to support by not participating or allowing to participate in negotiations. That sent an unmistakable message to the government, to the military in Afghanistan, that the Taliban were somehow more prominent in our interests and in our discussions than they were. And I think the repercussions of have been felt very recently.

So hopefully we won't make that mistake again, and we'll begin to address the ability in which we have to restrict their access. Likewise to the evacuation, they're going to play a critical part. And so too, for future counter-terrorism operations, which I don't know what over the horizon means. I think practically speaking, it is a myth. It sounds interesting, but practically, it is an impossibility. And again, we didn't see the collapse coming. How are we supposed to obtain the precision intelligence guide, strike operations from a couple thousand miles away? It's not going to happen. But what will happen, of course, is terrorism will exploit the opportunity they've been given. And they'll re-emerge, more powerfully than they had in the past, and we'll be unprepared to compete with it, certainly and counter it effectively.

Ambassador Husain Haqqani:

And Nadia, if I may say something quickly, recognition and access to financial resources, these are two leverages we still have over the Taliban, and we shouldn't give this leverage up as quickly as we gave up other leverage when we negotiated directly with the Taliban. At that time, if you remember, 5,000 prisoners of the Taliban, including Sirajuddin Haqqani's brother were in prison in Afghanistan. We forced the Afghan Government to release them. And that basically left our government with no leverage. So let us not give up leverage before conditions are met.

H. R. McMaster:

Husain, on the same point, how could it be in our interest to have the same envoy who is partially responsible for this catastrophe, who gave up all the leverage, who actually delivered the psychological blows to the Afghan Government and the Afghan security forces that helped contribute to this collapse? Why is that same person still representing the United States with Taliban leadership? I think it's way past time to put somebody new into that effort.

Ambassador Husain Haqqani:

Equally important, why does the person does not have the dignity to just resign and step down after such a debacle?

Nadia Schadlow:

So actually, we've seen, I think, in some sense, we're developing a set of near-term indicators to indicate how serious the White House is on these issues or not. The August 31st deadline, the issue of financing, the issue of recognition and US representation. And these are clear indicators that we can all look at and at least begin to measure in the near term. I liked Husain's point about the past 20 days, two years, and

20 years. So we can do this in the near term. I'd like to shift for a minute to some of our other actors in the region. And so this might seem naïve, but the Biden Administration has really been saying for months now that our relationship with our rivals is both competitive, but also cooperative. Many have been skeptical on that. But is there any hope here that Russia, that China might see an opportunity to cooperate on the humanitarian issues and work with us to be, at least if not facilitators, not create obstacles to helping on the humanitarian side? Or is that just hopelessly naïve of me? HR, what do you think?

H. R. McMaster:

I think at a very limited level, it's not unrealistic. I think that that's possible in terms of the extension of a deadline and then maybe the continuation of evacuation. I really think that despite the Kremlin's tendency to act against us, even when it cuts against Russian interests, I think that they would probably sign up to assist in that connection. The Chinese, I just don't know. I think the Chinese have a far different approach to these situations in which they just try to maximize gains for themselves and not get involved in any negotiation or discussion with the Taliban that would be beyond those issues sets that they really want to advance, which is probably to extract mineral wealth from the country, and to create a servile relationship with the Taliban that it can use against us from a geo-strategic perspective. And of course, China is the key enabler. The only real major state sponsor of the Pakistanis as well. So I would say if there's hope for an adversary assisting in the short-term effort to mitigate the humanitarian catastrophe, the Russians might do that. The Chinese probably would talk some kind of a game and then do nothing.

Ambassador Husain Haqqani:

The other question I have is what can we and what will we ask them to do? Secondly, are we watching what they are saying and what they are thinking? I'm rather scared, or rather worried, that what they are thinking is that if the Americans could use Islamist extremism and terrorism to bring the Soviet Union down, why can't we reverse this by doing some kind of a deal?

So the Taliban have a deal with the Chinese that they will not sponsor groups that will attack inside China. But if these groups are directed at the United States, who knows if the Chinese might actually lend a helping hand? The same might be the case with the Russians, and we should prepare for that. As I said, we need a huge exercise on worst-case scenarios, because the Biden administration just assumed that the best-case scenario is going to play out, and it hasn't.

Nadia Schadlow:

Rob, did you want to comment on this at all? You've seen, obviously understanding the Russian role in Syria. So any possibility here of something different?

Rob Greenway:

Well, look, I think first that they're both content watching us make mistakes, and I think that'll satisfy them to a certain extent. To General McMaster's point, they'll be quick to exploit this for commercial gain. And to Ambassador Haqqani's point, I think he's right, we need to look at the worst case. Which to

my mind is everyone's competing interest in Afghanistan typically defaults to a position in which no one is designed to obtain and extract benefit.

And what that results in is everyone picks a side, and you've got an internal conflict fueled by a variety of external sponsors. And I think that's the default position for a reason. I think that's very likely to be the default position going forward. It is a natural state of entropy, and I think it's going to be all too easy for external parties to continue to sow discord among the varying constituent parts.

And again, the Taliban may now seem monolithic, as contrast to what happened after the Soviet withdrawal. But this is an illusion and very quickly I think it'll start to fracture, or I should say it should start to visibly fracture where it already has. And so, I suspect that at the end of the day, internal conflict fueled by external parties is probably going to be what we're likely to encounter.

Which again goes back to worst-case scenario planning and mitigation on our steps now in consultation with allies, because the situation as bad as it is now actually could get a great deal worse very, very quickly.

Nadia Schadlow:

HR, do you want to comment a little bit on that about further unraveling and what it might look like?

H. R. McMaster:

I think we do have an opportunity even in this catastrophe to try to rally others to isolate the worst actors. And those are the states that aid and abet jihadist terrorists. That now includes the Taliban that's in control in Afghanistan, but it also does include Pakistan. And I'm reminded, Rob, of our efforts back in 2017 to 2018 to enlist our Gulf friends in an effort to isolate Pakistan, and convince Pakistan that it's in Pakistan's interest to go after these jihadist terrorist groups less selectively. This should be our message to China for what it's worth anyway.

But I think one of the reasons why we saw a bit of lack of resolve on the part of some of our Gulf friends is, again, because of this narrative of disengagement broadly from the greater Middle East. And we have to realize that countries aren't going to do what we ask them to do just because we say that we're friends. They oftentimes do it because they see it in our mutual interest, and they value our relationship because they see that relationship as in their interest.

And so, I think this is important for us to recognize is this broad narrative of viewing the greater Middle East as just a mess to be avoided and disengagement from it as an unmitigated good is also relevant to, Nadia, this theme that you've introduced, which is what can be done essentially from the outside in, not only with partners and allies, but even with adversaries to control the damage.

Nadia Schadlow:

Yeah. It's not optimistic. It's hard to retain any sense of hope going forward, but I think we have to think through constructively what we can still do. I think I'd like to switch a little bit to looking at, maybe another indicator is this idea that suddenly we can continue the CT mission, the counter-terrorism mission there, which is really in many ways absurd. It's one of the many things that made me cringe as I was listening to statements from the White House over the past few days.

Because we had a CT mission there, to Husain's point. Over the past two years, we had already shifted essentially to a CT mission with about 2,500 troops there at any given time. It provided us with the eyes and the ears and a presence in the region. And so the idea of recreating something in the aftermath of this debacle, it just seems remarkable to me, mind-boggling that we're making that argument.

Especially when, in order to be effective in the counter-terrorism domain, you have to work with local partners. So what local partners are going to sign up to work with us elsewhere in the region? Does anyone want to comment on that a little bit? Thank you.

Ambassador Husain Haqqani:

I would begin by talking to the Uzbeks and the Tajiks. They still have lots of residual Russian influence, but we could make it worth their while. Look, after 9/11, when President Bush called General Musharraf, who was Pakistan's military dictator at the time, he said, "You will bear consequences if you do not support us in our mission in Afghanistan. But we could make it worth your while. We could actually give you assistance that you badly need." And General Musharraf turned on a dime.

Now of course, nobody kept an eye on the details of what he was doing, which is always wrong because somebody who has wronged you once, you should always expect them to wrong you again, and therefore keep an eye. But that's a different story. In case of the Uzbeks and the Tajiks, they may actually need a lot more support to make it worth their while to help a CT mission.

And I think that there is room to talk to Pakistan in a different way. The reason why I say it's a different way is because I've been in the room many, many times. The Americans say, "You are doing this." The Pakistanis say, "We are not doing that." And then it just becomes a circular conversation. There has to be what we had originally proposed, HR will remember, that President Trump actually made that speech in which there were all those suggestions about what specific measures are going to be taken. And then he changed his mind a year later.

That basically, either make it worth someone's while to be our allies, or make them face some consequence for running against our interests. That is the reality of that region if we can actually embrace it. I don't think that the Biden administration right now is inclined towards doing either.

H. R. McMaster:

Yeah, I think one way to put it to the Pakistanis is that we know what it looks like if you're isolated as a pariah state with a single state sponsor. That's North Korea. And if you want that as your future, that's the path that Pakistan should be on based on their behavior. And I think that there may be an opportunity to make that point as the disaster of what's happening in Afghanistan actually blows back into Pakistan. And Husain and Rob, I wonder if you'd talk maybe more about the regional implications?

But of course, what's happening in Afghanistan's not going to stay there. And that's associated obviously with the refugee crisis, the degree to which refugee crises are really perfect recruiting circumstances for jihadist terrorists. And of course, the situation in the frontier provinces and Uzbekistan is already destabilized. So I think that there is going to be a major ripple effect and it's going to hit Pakistan first, but I think it will reverberate across the region.

Ambassador Husain Haqqani:

And Pakistan's leaders are aware of that. At least the military leaders are. And the Pakistani military leader, General Bajwa, has said that he's concerned about that. Now, how does it play out? Because the civilian leader, Imran Khan, has a different worldview, at least publicly expressed. General Bajwa has a different view.

And then there is the history between the US and Pakistan, which there is no denying of. So how do we actually crack this nut is going to be a tough one, but someone needs to pay attention to how to do it. The same applies to going forward with relations with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, we need a physical presence in the region. This over-the-horizon business, I agree with Rob, is more of one of those little bumper stickers, just like end all forever wars. That kind of bumper sticker policymaking is what leads you to the mess that we are seeing right now.

Rob Greenway:

Yeah, there's no question. I think that the ramifications of what we've just handed the Taliban and their allies and partners is unquestionably going to extend beyond the region. Already you're seeing a reverberation in all of the social media platforms and internal discussions that are had between Jihadi-affiliated groups. The center for the movement is now returned back to Khorasan and back to Afghanistan. And so, all of the attention that ISIS had in the day and all of its recruits and residual impact, the gravity is now shifted back in the other direction and it has enormous momentum behind it.

And we know, unfortunately, what this often results in is external operations will recommence. When we started to look at internal options to manage the counter-terrorism capacity for a number of years, just collapsing on Bagram made the position almost untenable, our ability to conduct counter-terrorism across the country, because we lost our ability to assess and anticipate and detect terrorist threats, which enable precision strike operations.

And again, to your point, Nadia, without local partners, now convinced that we don't have the commitment to stay, it's going to be very complicated. To try and conduct it from outside the region, outside Afghanistan becomes incredibly difficult. But I'll go back to something that Husain mentioned very early on in terms of what our interests truly are. And I think we've very narrowly, understandably, talked about the counter-terrorism perspective, but I think counter-proliferation is equally important.

In fact, I would say it's probably more important when it comes to our residual presence and our approach to Afghanistan. And this is not just confined to Pakistan as a nuclear state with enormous threats and challenging leadership, but it also pertains to Iran, which I would say is, again, equally important. And it's also how these conversations are intertwined. If you want to convince Pakistan that it risks isolation, including its sponsors in the Gulf which largely keep its economy, such as it is, afloat, you're also then going to have to address the fact that we're allowing Iran, from the region's perspective, to obtain nuclear weapons. And they look again to Pakistan, whose program they supported as a potential safeguard.

So all these issues are inextricably tied, and I think it requires reevaluation. And perhaps in this crisis, reevaluation may occur. And I'll go back to one other thing that was discussed earlier on which bothers me about this entire incident, really, because I think it's likely to be repeated. If you get a decision-making

process that's divorced from reality, you get bad outcomes. And if you don't fix that, you're going to do it again and again.

And as I and others learned working with General McMaster and working with you, Nadia, we labored hard to make sure that accurate decision got to decision-makers, and that informed decisions. My concern is that this decision of precipitous withdrawal and its aftermath, that both, I think, have fallen victim to the same problem of inaccurate information getting to decision-makers and you get very bad outcomes. And that of course could be perpetuated.

H. R. McMaster:

And that's the drive to tell the decision-maker what he or she wants to hear. And in this case, the phrase that Vice President Biden used to use all the time, "Don't box me in." So what he used to perceive military advice, best military advice or any advice, rather than providing him really with the reality, the assessment that's necessary to make the best decision, he saw it as limiting his ability to pursue his perceived course of action.

And I think what we have to recognize is, is this is really the result of not only, not ignorance, but arrogance. Arrogance combined with weakness. And the belief that whatever one decides in their Washington bubble, regardless of what the situation is abroad, will determine the outcome. And it's really our decision to act or not to act.

And what we don't do is attribute agency to our enemies and our adversaries. This is how you get an agreement like the JCPOA, for example, by not considering the nature of the Iranian regime, and their four-decade-long proxy war against us, and the ideology that drives and constrains that theocratic dictatorship. And it's what you get with the Taliban. This strategic narcissism, it relates to this major deficiency of optimism bias, confirmation bias, and they have to shake this off if they're going to make any wise decisions in the future about how to limit the catastrophe that they created.

Ambassador Husain Haqqani:

And there's this assumption that we can change others. So for example, the Obama administration spent a lot of time saying we will change Pakistan's strategic calculus. We will make them not think about India as much. And of course that didn't work out too well, because that was their way of trying to get Pakistan or dissuade Pakistan from supporting the Taliban. Now, there is this assumption that the Taliban's desire for international legitimacy and avoiding being an international pariah will make them change. They won't change. The Iranian theocracy, which is a Shia theocracy, hasn't changed much. We have put our faith in too many people as, well, that's a moderate Iranian leader.

Well, the moderate Iranian leader also has to operate within the parameters of the Shia theocratic ideology. The same is the case with Afghanistan. They will be a Sunni theocracy in Afghanistan, and they too will operate only within the parameters of their belief system. This assumption that somehow we'll dangle a few million dollars or a few billion dollars and they will give up what they have fought for. Look, the current Amir of the Taliban, his son died in a suicide bombing. Think about it. So a man who lets his son be a suicide bomber certainly does not think about world affairs exactly the same way as the secretary of state of the United States does.

Nadia Schadlow:

Thanks Husain. I didn't know that. Let's switch a little bit before we wrap. I'd like to speak a little bit about our allies, especially some of our NATO allies. I've been in contact with friends from London, from the UK. Could we talk a little bit, maybe HR or some insights into what they're saying, how they're feeling, and actually the position of some of their troops on the ground now. Right? We've often forget that the way that we made the decision to leave directly put British French soldiers lives, German soldiers lives in danger, right? By doing what we did. Could you talk a little bit about that and about what you think the ripple effects will be on NATO, HR?

H. R. McMaster:

Yep. There's a tremendous amount of anger, but when I speak with old friends in Europe, and what I think is striking about this is the Biden administration came in with this idea of better relations with allies. But it begs the question, better relations for what purpose, right? And not only do we exclude the Afghan government from these negotiations, but we also excluded our European and other allies, other coalition members, the Turks and others who were part of this mission. And so there's a sense of outrage, but also mainly betrayal. And we've lost a lot of credibility, Nadia. I mean, we really have to put a lot of efforts in restoring our credibility internationally to somehow begin to remove the stain on our reputation, but we have to do it with more than words and a democracy conference in December, which is almost going to be... It's going to be an embarrassment.

So I think what we have to do is work together and show through our deeds that we are determined to have a strong relationship for the purpose, for the purpose of protecting the world from jihadist terrorists, who are the enemies of all civilized people, to deterring Russian and Chinese various forms of aggression, that cut against our interests and international security. I mean, we need to put together an agenda and begin to work together on it in a determined way that shows our resolve and to stop these discussions about process and how many meetings we had, how many cocktail parties we went to. And talk about really, what are the outcomes that we have to work on together?

Nadia Schadlow:

Thanks, HR. So I think I'm going to give everyone a chance, well, to wrap and to finally to summarize some of their key thoughts or key takeaways. I personally am beginning to think about things in a sort of broad dichotomy of the arguments out there. There are those that want to lead us to discussions about, as Husain said, the past 20 years, what went wrong, what went right. The initial reasons for the intervention. Of course, those are important discussions, and we should all be having them over time, but that's a different issue from what we're talking about now, which is the catastrophe of how we executed a withdrawal, right?

And they're related, but they're two different issues. And we need to focus, I think, on what we can do over the next month. All of your points are really important. Where are our points of leverage, looking at the indicators that I mentioned, looking at allies and partners, that we can actually achieve things with maybe quickly, right? As opposed to working defacto, always through multilateral processes that take forever to actually come to fruition. So I think the most... We can focus on that latter point and hopefully we can continue to do that at Hudson. But now I'll let Rob, I'll start with you now to say some final thoughts as we wrap. Thanks.

Rob Greenway:

Yeah. Thanks and appreciate the opportunity to talk with all of you today. Look, I think in the end, this is definitely going to come down to trust and we've lost it in large measure, but I think we have the opportunity to regain it because nothing like a crisis tends to fix your attention and others. So I think we can, and hope we do, reverse course quickly in order to grasp the situation, deal with it as it is, then prepare for the likely contingencies.

And I think we've got opportunities as we've discussed today in order to do that. And I think we have leverage over the Taliban certainly. And I think that we're going to have other opportunities as the days and weeks roll by. I also think this isn't restricted to the conversation in South Asia. I think overall, you've seen a narrative of US withdraw from the Middle East more broadly, and this tends to reinforce it. And that obviously erodes our position and provides China, Russia, and others and opportunity, and certainly terrorist groups to reemerge. I hope we'll take advantage of this crisis and go from humanitarian assistance to shoring up our position in the region and re-establishing deterrence. And again, if we don't fix the conditions that resulted in bad decisions, if we don't introduce reality into decision-making, then we're going to see a repeat this process and we can't afford to do so. Thanks again for the opportunity.

H. R. McMaster:

I'll jump in here, Nadia, and then turn over to Husain for the final, final comments, but lost wars have consequences. And I think that the Trump administration and the Biden administration proceeded with the capitulation negotiations and agreement, and then the implementation of disagreement in a way that acted like lost war doesn't have consequences. We've talked about many of them today, but we haven't talked about one that I think is going to be immensely important to our country's ability to defend itself. And that's the potential erosion of our confidence, our confidence in who we are as a people, our confidence in our ability to implement a sustained and reasoned approach to foreign policy, and especially to execute military operations abroad that are in our vital interests.

That's going to have a ripple effect I'm afraid across our armed forces where my fellow service men and women, retired service men and women veterans currently serving are, I think, experiencing a bit of a crisis of confidence and an erosion of our warrior ethos and an ethos that is based on principles like self-sacrifice and honor and trust, sacred trust that binds them together, right? Us together within military organizations and between us and the society in whose name we fight and serve.

And I've seen kind of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of that ethos when the president evokes images of headstones in his speech, when he talks about our withdrawal from Afghanistan, or makes the announcement of our complete withdrawal from area 60, where many of our heroes from the fight in Afghanistan are buried or laid to rest. And I think he's created this image that soldiers want to be pitied, or that veterans are somehow fragile, traumatized human beings. And I think what we have to do is explain to our warriors that the 20 year fight with which they were engaged was a noble endeavor. It was a noble endeavor that it had to do with the response to the most destructive terrorist attack in history and their efforts not only prevented another attack on that scale, but they also helped Afghans get their country back from the hell of Taliban rule from '96 to 2001.

And it is watching tragically, horrifically, the loss of those rights, the loss of those vast improvements in the quality of their lives, that they can see the nobility of that endeavor. And I think that's the kind of conversation we need to have with our veterans. And I think we need to make a concerted effort to help strengthen and preserve the warrior ethos, which I'm afraid is eroding for other reasons as well, but eroding because of these horrible images of a lost war in Afghanistan,

Ambassador Husain Haqqani:

For my final comments, I'm going to say that foreign policy is always more complicated than being a simple choice between whom to bomb and whom to take out for lunch. And just because a situation becomes more complicated or slightly longer than some politicians in America, might've anticipated does not mean that all of a sudden the people you were bombing, you think, ah, we'll invite them to the Ritz Carlton in Doha, and things will get better. It doesn't work that way.

The mistakes of the last 20 years could be redressed in 20 months or two years in the future. But this precipitate withdrawal has had consequences that we will be mitigating over a longer time. The real point is can we start the mitigating process right away? We have to mend fences with our allies, make sure that people know that what happened with the Afghan government is not what's going to happen to every other American ally that is embattled at a particular moment.

The enemies need to know that just because they manage to sort of set us out, that they will always be welcomed with a handshake and turning things back to them. And also we need to create a real deterrence, and we need to understand both people that we fight. Sometimes the kind of things I hear from people about the Taliban, that they will eventually do this or that. What makes you say that? See what they have been saying. For example, we pursued for the last two years the idea that there will be a power sharing agreement with the Taliban. The Taliban have been consistently saying in their statements that we will not share power with anyone because we have a divinely granted right to take over and implement what we consider to be true Islam. So why don't we believe when somebody says I'm about to harm you. And the same applies to all our other enemies, let us stop bluffing ourselves and become a little realistic.

Nadia Schadlow:

Well, thank you to all of the speakers this afternoon. It's been an incredibly interesting discussion, not uplifting, but hopefully we've come away with a few concrete ideas going forward. I think I'm left with the sense of reminder of the essence of strategy, being that it always creates a new set of conditions for us, right? Now, we have a new set of conditions we're facing. They're not great conditions. They're not optimal conditions, but hopefully there are leaders left in this country that can help us navigate them to a better place to mitigate some of the worst of what we've seen over the past 10 days or so. So thank you very much, everyone. I look forward to working with all of you in the future and best wishes to all. Thank you.

H. R. McMaster:

Thank you, Nadia. Thanks everybody.