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BARRY POSEN: So I want to welcome everyone to today's MIT Starr Forum on the US, Afghanistan, and September 11th, Finished or Unfinished Business? I'm Barry Posen, the Ford International Professor of Political Science at MIT. And there'll be links to my bio and that of other people later.

I'd like to begin by thanking the MIT Center for International Studies, whose video you just saw, and MIT Security Studies Program, which is one of its constituent elements, for sponsoring today's event. I'd also like to thank our speakers and of course you for attending this webinar.

If you haven't already, please find the Q&A feature on the bottom of your toolbar. This is where you can type in your questions. We will try to get to as many as possible at the end of the talk. In addition, please pay attention to the chat feature also at the bottom of the toolbar, where there will be basically directions to find various pieces that the rest of us have written.

I just want to say, a minute or two about what brings us together here and then I will introduce our speakers. Basically, it's two milestones that stimulated this meeting. One is the United States and NATO's disengagement from Afghanistan and the concomitant collapse of the Ghani government and the victory of the Taliban.

And also the 20 year anniversary of the terrible terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, which provided the impetus for the initial US military action to overthrow the Taliban, attack al-Qaeda, and not very long thereafter, begin the 20-year effort to remake Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan effort cost thousands of lives, Afghan lives, and US and Allied lives, and probably cost the US at least a trillion in direct costs and trillions more in indirect costs. And there are likely future costs that are yet to be paid. We know that this effort did not achieve exactly what the US and its Western and even Afghan allies had hoped. And what it did achieve remains to be seen.

What happens next in Afghanistan, the region, and our own involvement are open questions, some of which we'll consider this afternoon. And insofar as the US-led global war on terror goes on, a cool appraisal of the Afghan experience may provide some immediately useful policy lessons. And we meet today against the backdrop of this week's congressional hearings on the Afghanistan withdrawal, hearings that have been anything but cool, but we will do our best.

I would just like to offer one clarifying observation about how Afghanistan has been discussed in the past few weeks by experts and in the media. There are two distinct issues raised by the disengagement, one is strategic and the other is tactical. They surely affect each other, but at the same time one needs to remain clear about which issue is under discussion and why.

The strategic issue is whether disengagement or continuation of the war made sense from a US and, yes, NATO Ally and national security perspective. The tactical issue is whether the disengagement process itself went about as well as one could expect under the circumstances or was essentially a series of blunders, unforced errors.

And this panel bears mainly on the strategic question. We probably won't get into the tactical questions very much. But I know they're on people's minds, and if they come up, they come up, and we'll do the best we can with them. Today, we have three speakers to offer some perspectives on the US-led Afghan war.

Speakers who tell us about the nature of Afghan society, the US-led effort to reform it, US effort to try and defeat the Taliban, the implications of the disengagement for regional actors, and perhaps what we can read from the tea leaves of the Taliban's initial days in power. I just will give you brief introductions of all the speakers and then we will move straight into their presentations.

And I think we have a slide on that. Is that right? OK, good. So you can see this. I'll read it, but your eyes are faster than my words. Juan Cole is the Richard Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan. He's an expert on the modern Middle East, Muslim South Asia, and social intellectual history. His most recent book is *Muhammad, Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires*.

Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow, Center for the Security Strategy and Technology at Brookings, is also the director of the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors and the co-director of the Africa Security Initiative. She recently co-authored a piece on the fate of women's rights in Afghanistan. And she has a PhD from us here at MIT.

And last but not least Carol Saivetz, a senior advisor to the MIT Security Studies Program is an expert on Soviet and now Russian foreign policy issues, and on topics ranging from Russian energy politics in the Caspian and Black Sea regions the questions of stability in Central Asia, and to Russian policy toward Iran and to the greater Middle East.

And we'll basically proceed in that order. And I'm going to turn the floor over to Juan.

JUAN COLE: Thank you very much, Barry. Well, I wanted to talk a little bit as a historian about what the Afghanistan misadventure really means in history. And I'll make an argument that it was a form of neo-colonialism.

In the age of Maritime discovery and after-- or Maritime expeditions and after-- the Europeans discovered that they'd gotten a little bit ahead of much of the rest of the world, including highly civilized and advanced societies like China and India. And in that era, if your gun shot a little bit further, then you won the war.

And they were able to establish colonies. Small Britain with a population of, at that time, some 5 million was able to conquer an India with over 100 million inhabitants. And that era passed. And I would argue as a historian that it passed because of the mobilization of people in the Global South.

The social mobilization, they became more urbanized, they became more literate. And the political mobilization, they developed political parties or analogous organizations. And the freedom fighters in India, for instance, deployed that mobilization. Newspapers, and telegraph, and modern transportation networks, as well as the political party, the congress party, and the Muslim League, against the British.

And were able to mobilize sufficient numbers of South Asians into those forms of politics to make it untenable for the British to stay in India. And the British hadn't given up on staying in India. At least, the right hadn't-- Winston Churchill imagined being there for hundreds of more years, as late as the 1930s.

And so the age of colonialism passed, not because the great powers found it less lucrative to control these other countries and their resources or because they became more humane, but because of the mobilization of the population, which made it what had been an unequal military encounter a much more equal one.

And when the United States went into Iraq and Afghanistan and militarily occupied them, which is a phrase that one very seldom hears in the journalistic discourse-- or the political one-- but that's what happened. These countries were invaded and they were militarily occupied.

The US replicated the colonial experience. It colonized these countries. And the cabal of the Bush administration that promoted this sort of thinking was explicit about wanting colonies. The project for the new American century was about using this moment where the US had no pure power, where the Soviet Union had fallen apart, where there was really only one superpower, to assert American interests in the world.

And apparently, they imagined that American interests were to become a new empire. And they spoke very arrogantly about being an empire. Ron Suskind quoted one of the Bush administration people to this effect, that intellectuals can analyze and critique what's being done.

But we're an empire now, and when we act, we create a new reality. And every time we act, we create a new reality. And so the intellectuals will just spend their time studying all of these realities that we create. But we are the empire. We are the decision makers.

And that kind of arrogance was met with reality on the ground. The initial US attack on Afghanistan could be justified. al-Qaeda had training camps there, which were used to plot out 9/11. And so destroying those camps, making sure they couldn't continue to operate, was a legitimate military mission

But in order to deal with a small terrorist group like al-Qaeda, which was tiny, there were 5,000 fighters in the 55th brigade. By occupying an entire country of millions of people, and a difficult country to run and occupy, was crazy and it was fore doomed to fail. The United States could not colonize this country.

Moreover, those old colonial conditions under which the locals were unmobilized villagers with insufficient arms and organization to fight back no longer exists. That's not the world in which we live. And so as the United States and its allies occupied this country, they did search and destroy missions, they alienated more and more people.

They created winners and losers locally. They favored some ethnic groups over others, inevitably. There was enormous corruption. Billions of dollars flowed into the country, much of it was embezzled by the new elites that were allied with the United States, which means that there were lots of people who remained very desperately poor.

In fact, as late as last spring, the UN estimated 12 million Afghans were food insecure. This is under the US-stood-up government of Ashraf Ghani-- which is about a third of the country-- while there were cargo planes full of cash flying out of the country at some point to Dubai.

So it was an enormously corrupt system. The new Afghanistan security forces that the US stood up, like those in Iraq, had no real esprit de corps, for the most part. They would fight under certain circumstances, and some 66,000 of them lost their lives fighting the Taliban. But were they really fighting for Ahmed Karzai or for Ashraf Ghani, for the leaders at the top of their government? Who were, in the case of Karzai, quirky and corrupt, in the case of Ghani, simply corrupt.

The US effort to train these security forces, which President Biden thought extended to 300,000 between police, and gendarmerie, and local police. The effort to train them was half-hearted. It was contracted out. The contractors were often not very good. In the '00s, there was a study done that there the shooting accuracy of these troops was not improving despite training. And a investigation showed that the contractors brought in to teach them to shoot with the US rifles weren't teaching them to use the sights.

There were high levels of desertion from the new army every year. As much as a third had to be replaced. There were high levels of use of marijuana and other drugs. There was low esprit de corps.

The US set this system up so that the Kabul military command sent out troops to provinces to forward operating bases, where these troops were often surrounded by people of a different ethnicity and who might be hostile to the central government, and had to constantly be supplied with ammunition and weaponry, and even sometimes, staples. That system of resupply is the only thing that kept the lattice work up.

When President Trump made a peace deal with the Taliban in February of 2020, that lattice work began collapsing-- right from then. And so when the US and the Taliban agreed not to attack one another, one of the implications of that was that the US didn't supply as much in the way of air support to these provincial forward operating bases.

It still would do so if the big cities were under attack. And it doesn't seem to be a stipulation of the treaty, but according to the regional press, the US stopped using air support to defend the smaller towns and cities. And the Taliban were very much like the Chinese communists in 1948 and '49. They were a rural movement.

They initially had the greatest influence in the least densely populated parts of the country. And through the last five years, and especially the last two years, they've been moving in on the more densely populated provinces and on the towns and cities. And at that point, where the US in early 2020 ceased providing as much in the way of air support, they began making rapid gains in the countryside.

Now initially in 2020, the big cities-- Kabul, and Kandahar, Mazar, Herat-- seemed safe enough. But they were being surrounded all this time. And so by already early summer of this year, the Taliban probably controlled a good half of the country. And they were constantly negotiating with the provincial troops who were aware that they were getting less and less support, that the prospect of support was evaporating as the US reduced its role and prepared to leave entirely.

The US expected that the Afghan National Army would pick up the slack. That there were 300,000 troops, that they had their own now helicopters that they could fly the resupply missions. That did not happen.

In part it was because many Afghan officers were maintaining ghost roles. And this happened in Iraq and Mosul as well, whereby they were simply banking the salaries that were supposedly going to their troops. Their troops were AWOL or had been dismissed, and the money was just building up in their bank accounts.

I do not know how many troops they actually had, but it was not 300,000. And it was certainly not 300,000 fighters. And so the corruption of this enterprise was enormous. It was a little bit like a Ponzi scheme-- a Ponzi scheme fails at that point where new marks stop paying in. And what Trump really did was to announce that he was no longer a mark and he was going to stop paying in, which was when, in February of 2020, the whole Ponzi scheme began collapsing.

Now President Biden when he came in really only had two choices, either to proceed with-- to the bitter end with the collapse that Trump had initiated. And remember, as I said it was far advanced already by early summer of this year. Or to reverse the entire enterprise, to essentially break the peace deal with the Taliban so that they would then again begin attacking US troops and go to war with them.

Now this is what Biden himself, says is what Secretary of State Blinken has said, and it is correct. It was not possible, as some have suggested, to, well, why couldn't we keep 6,000 troops there forever? Once Trump had made this peace deal, the network of support for those troops-- and remember, US troops are hosted by the in-country military.

The network of support for those troops began evaporating. It was no longer there when this summer. And moreover, the Taliban hadn't been attacking them because of the peace treaty. They would start attacking them again, and they're small in number. So we would have had to go to war.

And the question is, why? Why would we go to war? The United States gained nothing from this presence in Afghanistan, from this colonizing mission. There were no resources that came to the United States, from a realist point of view. There was no great power pure that we were blocking by being there.

If the issue was counterterrorism, occupying an entire country is not necessary to do counterterrorism. And in fact, diverts resources from it. And so I would argue that the entire thing was ill-conceived. We're no longer in an age of colonialism.

The locals have very effective weaponry. They can organize as guerrillas. And decolonization proceeded rather quickly after colonization. And then we were kicked out, we lost. And we also didn't achieve any essential goals.

BARRY POSEN: Thank you, Juan. I gather I owe you all an apology for rattling my papers next to my microphone. So sorry about that disturbance. We're going to turn now to Vanda Felbab-Brown.

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much, Barry. And thank you for the invitation. It is with some poignancy and gravity that I reflect on Afghanistan so close to 9/11, a time when I was at MIT. In fact, the very day of 9/11, I was at MIT in the Security Studies Program.

And it was also with a great sense of poignancy for the collapse in Afghanistan. It's a country that I've traveled to some 30 times since 2004, and often spent months, weeks on the ground traveling around the country, and have formed many friendships and seen much of the complexity. And it is, indeed, a complex place, one that does not easily fit stereotypes of cultural explanations.

It's a very complex place. There are competing ideas about identity, politics, how to rule the country, civil rights, human rights, compete with each other. And of course, the United States intersected with them, and the international community, in profound ways over the past 20 years.

So what I will do in my 12 minutes is to think a little bit with you about some of the key defining policy choices and moments over the past 20 years, but really spent most of my time on, what can we say about the Taliban rule, the new Taliban regime today? And what is known, what are the trends, what are the challenges the regime will face? And will it be able to survive in power or not?

So from the very beginning, from really the immediate days after 9/11, the United States and every single administration-- the George W. Bush one, the Barack Obama one, Donald Trump, and ultimately, the Biden administration-- struggled with the following question. For countering terrorist attacks on the United States, on the homeland and assets abroad, is it sufficient to merely degrade a group? Or is it necessary to deny it the possibility of safe haven?

And of course, the decision of the Bush administration to not just strike back against al-Qaeda targets, but to depose the Taliban regime were to a large extent informed by the Clinton administration and its choice to strike al-Qaeda assets in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda camps with missiles in retaliation for the attacks on US embassy and *USS Cole*-- and those were seen as not sufficient.

Moreover, when the United States then deposed the Taliban regime, it found for domestic political reasons, international obligations, and other reasons, that it simply could not just leave the country. That it simply could not destroy the system, and leave, and let the system sort itself out.

And so from the very beginning and throughout every single day of the mission, both ground level tactical operations, larger strategic policy choices kept oscillating between, what is good enough? Is it enough simply to kill enough Taliban, enough al-Qaeda members? Or do we need to leave behind some sort of sustainable governing structures, ideally in the form of a sustained state?

And those questions were never fully resolved. The members of different administrations have different views on them, including then Vice President Biden urging that the United States withdraws earlier. And really, from the Obama administration, which came very close to withdrawing US forces from Afghanistan in 2014, and only did not do so because of the collapse in Iraq and the fact that ISIS was on the doorsteps in Baghdad, every subsequent administration was really deciding how to leave.

The big constraint on leaving, however, was the reality that if the United States left, the system would collapse. And we would both face the basic strategic challenge that there will be a rise of the Taliban power, and the risks that it would provide new havens for groups like al-Qaeda. And that of course all the investments, whether in terms of blood and treasure or in terms of economic investments and the achievements that have been reached for the quality of lives of many Afghans-- and those were very real achievements, even if limited in scope-- would be lost.

And so Professor Cole is absolutely right, that still 90% of Afghan people exist in poverty. But nonetheless, there is still a big difference between the poverty of today and the mass starvation and huge degradation of civil and human rights that was the case in the 1990s. So there were some real tangible gains that would be lost with US withdrawal if the Taliban returned to power.

And indeed, we are seeing those both economic progress gains, and civil and human rights gains, and political pluralism gains disappearing in front of our eyes. And the reason why the project, the state building project, and the effort to defeat the Taliban fundamentally didn't work were twofold.

Essentially, the United States never resolved how to dissuade Pakistan from providing multifaceted support to the Taliban. Down to the last days of July and August, when Pakistan officials, intelligence officers, were advising the Taliban how to launch attacks on places like Lashkar Gah. And throughout the entire 20 years, the material support safe havens and all kinds of other support.

And the second issue that we never resolved, and that really has plagued state building efforts around the world, whether those led by the United States or others, was how to persuade local governing elites to moderate their role so that it would not be outright rapacious, capricious, predatory, to the point that the Taliban's very brutal, but nonetheless tolerable rule would for many local populations-- hardly all, but some local populations-- be preferable and would give the Taliban enough entrenchment.

And in fact, over the past 20 years, and even if you go back to the 1990s, there was a second important difference. That the Taliban was both able to remain cohesive, unlike the governing elites in Afghanistan, who were extremely divided and constantly engaging in political contestations, rivalry politicking, and almost never engaging in governance.

And then the Taliban was capable of learning from its mistakes and making adjustments. Once again, unlike much of the Afghan government and associated political elites. So all the problems that Professor Cole outlined with respect to very inadequate poor logistics, low morale, crucial problems with enablers, all the problems that plagued the Afghan security forces this summer and brought it to its knees in 10 days were all known in 2012.

The ending chapter of my book, *Aspiration and Ambivalence* that came out at the beginning of 2013 is a chapter about both what will happen in peace negotiations and the problems of the Afghan security forces, and all of those problems outlined are essentially the ones that we knew then that we saw in 2015 when the Taliban for the first time took over the first provincial capital, Kunduz, and that ultimately brought the Afghan security forces down this summer.

And throughout this decade, those problems were not addressed. They were not addressed not because they were not known, they were not addressed because the political costs in Afghanistan were found to be too high to address them. In other words, a system where governance remained as miserable as it was was still preferable to devoting the political capital and other resources necessary to address the cost.

And one of the crucial reasons why the Afghan government and political elite constantly made this very same decision was that they persuaded themselves that the United States would never leave. President Hamid Karzai back in 2008 started talking about this notion that Afghanistan was the geopolitical fulcrum of the world. It was the centerpiece of the new great game that we envisioned the United States was engaged with, and that the United States would consequently never leave Afghanistan.

And Afghan elites were multiple times told this was not a correct understanding of US geostrategic interests and its definition of its foreign policy, nonetheless clung to it. And ultimately, after Doha, and really even as late as this July, believed that Afghanistan was simply too important to fail. And so at the last minute, the US would not withdraw. And constantly, they were putting off decisions and making choices and governance that would keep the rule corrupt, but nonetheless alive.

So I want to reiterate one thing that Professor Cole said, namely about the sort of policy of the notion that the United States could have stayed with a very limited force-- 2,000, 5,000 forces. The Taliban would have started attacking those troops and the US would need to escalate its presence.

So really, the only choice for the Biden administration was to leave and see the collapse or was to stay an open-ended fight that had no prospect of anything changing dramatically in the next 5 years or 10 years. It would simply be an open-ended commitment of holding the lid on the collapse.

And with all my friendships, all the massive emotional pain of my friends and my own, I came several years ago to the conclusion that it was time to go. And it was the right strategic decision by President Biden, even though it was inevitable that the horror and pain would follow in Afghanistan.

So let's now think a little bit about what the new government by the Taliban is looking, and what are the chances of its survival? What are the key issues that it will confront and is already confronting?

Well, first of all, the regime is very exclusionary and centers on the typical Taliban leadership that really constituted the core of the Quetta and Peshawar Shura, currently the Rabbari Shura. It really shares no power than any other actor in Afghanistan despite the fact that it has been promising assiduously over several years to very many different Afghan power brokers it would share power with them.

And crucial for its victory over the summer was a reiteration of these deals, many of which centered both on promises of political power sharing, but also crucially local rents. So one of the big things to watch is whether the Taliban will become too greedy and seek to exclude other actors from local rents that it derives from mining, poppy, logging-- essentially, any kind of economic activity. If it does that, its chances of survival will diminish further.

And one of the reasons why the regime is the current so-called interim government-- but the 1990s Taliban government was interim also the entire year of its rule-- is so exclusionary is that the principal threat to the Taliban really comes from within the group.

The Taliban's success has been its capacity to bridge over the wide differences, interests, ambitions, orientations, among its very many different factions. And it has been able to do so over 30 years, including over the past 20 years despite US and NATO efforts to fragment the group. But those fissures are very real. There are vastly different opinions about just about every aspect of the role that the Taliban is confronting.

And we are already seeing very significant cleavages and contestation on some of the principal axes, but highly [? sole ?] axes are those between [? Sirajuddin Haqqani, ?] [INAUDIBLE] Yaqoob, and [INAUDIBLE]. But there are also very, very substantial other differences between preferences of the sheiks, the mid-level military commanders within them and among them with respect to the top level shura.

Many of the younger mid-level commanders both in the mid-level and in the top levels, people like Sirajuddin and Yaqoob are far more plugged to global international jihadi networks than the Taliban of the 1990s. And they have no direct experience with the misrule, the mismanagement of governance that the old Taliban leadership experience, and that resonated with them to some extent.

So keep things together the coalition and preventing it from break up is the principal challenge for the Taliban, with break up being enabled by the existence of the Islamic State in Khorasan. It's the principal enemy of the Taliban. We can get into Q&A about how and why they emerged and what connections it had to Taliban, but it's the principal enemy of the group, and the Taliban has been fighting it assiduously. But the existence of IS-K provides an envelope for defection.

The second important aspect of whether the Taliban will face armed opposition is connected to the Islamic State, and more broadly to how it deals with ethnic and sectarian minorities. Again, in its initial rule, it's really not giving any minorities other than minority officials in the Taliban-- [INAUDIBLE] commanders that have been part of the Taliban for several years and in a [INAUDIBLE] role. And it's been able to quite readily crush the very weak Panjshir resistance-- another thing we can talk about in the Q&A.

But it doesn't mean that it will be able to continue crushing many of the uprisings and militias effectively in the same way, particularly if it starts violating the economic deal that it's promised them. Moreover, if it becomes very brutal toward the Shia, which is something that the Islamic State in Khorasan wants-- it's dead set on instigating a sectarian war-- it will significantly complicated its relations with Iran. And Iran will have at the point the capacity to activate the so-called Fatemiyoun, the tens of thousands Shia militias that Iran trained and deploy to fight in Syria and Libya.

Second crucial bucket of challenges for the Taliban is the economy. It is tanking. The Taliban has lost or frozen tremendous amount of resources over the past several weeks. Around \$14, \$15 billions of dollars have been frozen by the United States, in the United States, [INAUDIBLE], World Bank, and the European Union, in a country where foreign aid constituted about half of the country's economy-- 43% last year-- and 75% of the country's operating budget.

The Taliban has no capacity to recoup those losses. It has robust sources of income from various informal and illegal economies that at its upper estimates amount to about \$1.5, \$1.6 billion. Those come from taxation of any legal and illegal economic activity in Afghanistan, such as trade with neighboring countries.

But the trade will only persist if the Taliban is able to maintain the warmed-up relations with Iran, China, and Russia that it has been building up very effectively, very adroitly, over the past several years. If it doesn't deliver on its counterterrorism promises, such as no support from Taliban bigger units for the ETIM, or Uighurs more broadly in Xinjiang, or if it falls into the sectarian trap and is not able to restrain ISK and activates then Iran's Shia concerns, it will see borders closed and it will lose income from trade.

Also said that it intends to implement a poppy ban, something that I will leave for details in the Q&A if there is interest. I can talk at very great ones about the ban. It's been in the 1990s, the current promised ban. Let me just say that if the Taliban went and tried to implement it, it would face tremendous political risks.

It would generate a lot of instability for itself both economically and politically, and not simply from the larger impoverished population, but from some of its very core constituencies, including very powerful military sheiks and military commanders.

In conclusion, let me make a few words about the human rights, and political pluralism, and civil liberties pictures. Inevitably we are seeing dramatic losses in all three. They are not as catastrophic as in the 1990s. For example, the Taliban said that women will be allowed to have a university education-- big change from the 1990s-- as long as they are in segregated classes.

The Taliban has also said and is acting that women will be able to retain some jobs. It has told women in government offices, newscasting, banks, that they are no longer employed. But it has at least allowed women to retain jobs in health care. A lot of this will continue to be contested both between the population and the Taliban, as has been the case over the past 20 years and within the Taliban factions.

But essentially, we are looking, in my view, at three possibilities. The worst outcome is the rule that over time will come to look like the 1990s. The best outcome is an Iran-like system, with both the political structures of Iran-- potentially some power change underneath the leadership shura, underneath the leadership council-- likely not through elections, but perhaps maybe through some appointed consultative bodies.

And a set of political freedoms where women can have education, can have jobs, can leave the house without a guardian-- a crucial condition. And/or-- and this one the best outcome in my view-- and the middle outcome is sort of variation on the Saudi regime, which is where currently the indications are that we are heading.

The West and the international community more broadly does not have the capacity to easily bring down the Taliban regime, let alone to shape what would follow after. Nor can it dramatically change what rule internally will look like. But if it adopts adroit policies, it can shape rules at the margins, such as averting the most significant-- the worst rule choices. For example, we'll say attacks on Shia minorities, like the Hazara minorities, or no education, no employment for women.

And to some extent, some of the Taliban choices today are reflecting the bargaining that's going on. The bargaining will be effective if it centers on specific asks for specific positive inducements or negative consequences, such as visa of-- set of Taliban officials will be allowed if a rule like woman cannot leave a house without a male guardian is not adopted.

If the international bargaining centers on just blanket sanctions to wholesale to preserve the existing gains or topple the Taliban regime, the bargaining will not be effective. We will end up with situations like Venezuela, like Iran, like North Korea, like Myanmar, where the population is starving, the humanitarian situation is catastrophic, but the regime is entrenched and surviving through access to both illicit economies and informal economies, in particular, external sponsors.

With that, I look forward to the conversation after hearing Professor Saivetz.

BARRY POSEN: Thank you very much, Vanda. So Carol, I'm going to ask you to pick up where Vanda left off and tell us a little bit about the ripple effects in the region, if you might.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Great, thank you. OK. I want to thank CIS and SSP for inviting me to participate. Now I'm not an Afghan specialist, I'm a Russia specialist. So what I'm going to talk about are the implications, I think, for Russia and for Central Asia of the US pullout from Afghanistan and all the events that both Juan and Vanda just talked about.

By way of background, you'll all remember that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, basically because of fundamental weaknesses in the then communist government and reports that the government at the time was moving to ally itself with the United States. The Soviets fought a 10-year war against multiple tribal groups that were of course aided by us, and they finally withdrew in February of 1989. And of course the Soviet Union itself collapsed at the end of 1991.

When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, his primary goal oft stated was to restore Russia's great power status. And it's within that perspective that I think he thought that 9/11 represented a wonderful opportunity for Russia to demonstrate that it could ally itself with the United States, and in effect, to become the second power as the Soviet Union was to the United States.

It was a means to-- excuse me-- a means to an end to being a coequal power. Putin also thought at the time that he could get our approval for the war that the Russians were then fighting in Chechnya because after all, in his mind, we were both fighting terrorists-- we, the Taliban, and they, the Chechens. But of course, our support for the Chechen War was not forthcoming. We continued to condemn Russian human rights abuses as they prosecuted their war effort.

I think, but worse from Putin's perspective-- and you have to think about the timing here. You have 9/11. You have Putin being the first person to call Bush aboard Air Force One right after the attacks, approving help for our war effort, et cetera. And then you'll all remember the pictures of Putin and Bush traveling around Bush's ranch in Texas. And the joke was that Putin thought he was going to get to ride a horse and instead they were in a Jeep.

But following that meeting, which was November, Bush moved very quickly first to abrogate the ABM treaty, and then to push for the second round of NATO expansion. So you already have these frictions emerging in what Putin hoped would be this great sort of reset-- I hate to use that word, but reset of US/Russian relations.

I think the final and proverbial last straw was the war in Iraq. Not only did Putin not want us to wage war against Saddam Hussein, but Russians basically said to us, well, if you're going to go ahead and wage war, will you honor the oil contracts that Russian oil companies had just signed with the Saddam Hussein government? And we basically said, absolutely not.

And the reason I went through this quickie history is to establish a context for what was at best Putin's ambivalence about our presence in Afghanistan. To put it simply, as long as we were there, we were in effect doing what the Russians wanted us to do. We were trying to get rid of the Islamist forces within Afghanistan, and we were going to stabilize the country.

We never did some things that the Russians wanted us to do-- most prominently, interdict all the drugs trafficking that was flowing from Afghanistan through Tajikistan into Russia proper. Second thing that was on the plus side of this intervention was that as long as we were bogged down in Afghanistan, I think the Russians thought that we were less likely to challenge Russian expansion elsewhere.

Third, as our bilateral relationships soured, the question hanging over everything was how long Russia would tolerate a US presence on its border. So we went from, oh yes, will help you, to, OK, you're doing a fair job. But when are you going to get out?

And as you all know, we lost access to our base in Uzbekistan in early 2005, and ultimately we also lost the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan. And I would argue that today, we see the same kind of ambivalence about what is happening in Afghanistan today. In the first instance, the Russians seem to be gloating. All of Putin's public comments, and Lavrov's comments, et cetera, seem to be cheering the US humiliating defeat and the scenes of the disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan.

A corollary to that is that they seem to be broadcasting that the humiliation that we suffered in Afghanistan proves should prove to our allies that we're not a worthy ally, that we can no longer be trusted. Most specifically-- and this one sort of-- I don't even know what the right word is-- this one sort of bemuses me because I don't see any parallels between Afghanistan and Ukraine, but they seem to be using the Afghan example to warn the Ukrainians that we're not going to stay in their corner, and the Ukrainians should be wary of relying on US support.

But I take issue with all the articles in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and all the pundits whose claim that Biden has created major victories for Russia and China. It just doesn't appear to me to be that. There are certainly some pluses in what has happened. The most obvious is that, at least for the moment, the Central Asian states seem to be deepening their dependence on Russia.

The Russians have announced all kinds of new arms sales to the Central Asian states of, course on a concessionary basis. It also provides the Russians, I would argue, a chance to reinvigorate the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the CSTO, which was advertised when it was created as their NATO. But it's really just an intertwining of a series of bilateral arms agreements between Russia and each of the signatories to the treaty.

So what we've been seeing this summer are a series of military exercises beginning in August. Just last week, for example, there were joint exercises among the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Russian troops directed at-- and I quote-- "Illegal armed groups that infiltrate from another country," and you can certainly guess which country that is.

But you should also note that only 500 Russian troops actually participated in those joint exercises. This coming Thursday, two days from now, there will be a Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting to discuss what they're calling joint response measures-- again, to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan.

I think on the negative side of the balance-- and I don't think that this is getting nearly enough coverage, analysis, et cetera, is the fear of Islamist encroachment into Central Asia and perhaps Russia itself. There's a long history in Russia, particularly from the Chechens, but of terrorism from those claiming to be Islamists.

Certain groups in the North Caucasus have-- which is where Chechnya is-- have already proclaimed support for the Taliban. Russian pundits also seem to fear-- how to put that-- fear, what I could call victory by example.

That if the Taliban victory over-- that the Taliban victory over the US could re-energize forces that the Russians seem to have held at bay, particularly in Syria. And there's renewed concern now about the Islamist forces in and around Idlib province in Syria.

Russia is also looking for guarantees that the Taliban will curtail the opium trade. And Vanda just mentioned all the illicit part of the Afghan economy. And I'm not so sure the Taliban are going to be willing to do that because it's a major source of income.

And of course the Russians also fear the destabilization of the Central Asian states themselves. And here we have to talk about each one of the bordering states to Afghanistan. Let's do Uzbekistan first.

Uzbekistan has always seen itself as the leader of the Central Asian states. And while President Karimov was still alive, he seemed to have done his best to alienate each of the other states. The current president has acted much more as a unifier, and it seems to be trying to work collaboratively with the other states.

Uzbekistan has had formal ties with the Taliban for at least three years. But it also has the most fortified border with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has also been highly critical of those pilots and Afghan officers who fled across the bridge and fled into Uzbekistan as everything was crumbling in Afghanistan.

At the same time, Uzbekistan I think is looking to establish itself as some kind of humanitarian helper, as a [? carter, ?] if you will, because they've offered Termez as a hub for food assistance into Afghanistan, i.e., they want stability and they want the status that would accrue to being the helper in that regard.

Turkmenistan also has relations with the Taliban, but their focus has been primarily on trade. For years now, going back at least 20 years, there's been talk about a Turkmen/Afghan/Pakistan/Indian pipeline to get Turkmen oil and natural gas through to the Indian subcontinent. And I used to laugh when people would talk about this because it really depends on stability within Afghanistan. So I think Turkmenistan is still hoping that they can sell oil going east.

Of the bordering states, Tajikistan is the one that has been most hesitant and most alarmed about the reality that the Taliban are in control in Afghanistan. And again, Vanda referred to this. You have to keep in mind that 25% of Afghanistan is itself Tajik.

And the current president of Tajikistan, Mr. Rahmon, seems to be garnering support from the population within Tajikistan the more he offers support to the Tajik portions of Afghanistan. Russia, though, has a large military base on the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and China has a much smaller military presence there.

Let me make a couple more points. In the context of what I said previously about the CSTO, there's been a lot of discussion in the Russian press about Russia can and will do now. Russia seems confident, for whatever reasons, that Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan can hold their own.

The one place I would argue where there's a chance for much more active Russian intervention is Tajikistan. They already have the base there, and they seem to consider Tajikistan the weakest and least able to fight off any kind of incursions from Afghanistan. I think what they all want are promises-- guarantee's maybe too strong a word-- of no interference.

But as I said about Idlib province, I think the example of Taliban success in Afghanistan and ousting the United States may be tempting to some of the Islamist forces in the Central Asian states that have really lain dormant over the last several years. There is this potency of example.

I do not foresee any US presence in the region. But having said that, the United States has just announced that it's offering to build a border post in the corner of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, where the borders come together.

Another thing to watch going forward is going to be to see how Russia and China each deal with-- together with what's happening in Afghanistan. China seems to be much less nervous than the Russians about the situation there. A couple of weeks ago, Putin and Xi chatted on the phone. And what's interesting to look at are the readouts of the respective countries, or foreign ministries, of that call.

The Kremlin readout talked about, and I quote, "Stepping up efforts to combat threats of terrorism and drug trafficking coming from the territory of Afghanistan." The Chinese statement made no mention of that, but only talked about the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Afghanistan, period.

I think-- picking up on Vanda's point again-- that the reaction's going forward of all of these states is going to depend on what happens in Afghanistan and on the behavior and successes, as Vanda laid out, of the Taliban. Will they allow the export of Islamism into the Central Asian states or beyond? What will happen with the flow of refugees, which could be destabilizing to the surrounding states? And I think the following months are going to be very crucial. And I'll stop there.

BARRY POSEN: So I want to thank all three speakers for mainly sticking to the schedule. I'm going to try and summarize some questions. I'm not sure we'll have time to get to all of them.

I guess one question that I think came in several forms-- and it's not entirely direct to these talks, but it certainly bears on them-- is a question of how US government, political officials, and soldiers portrayed the state of play in Afghanistan-- not just to the American people, but to the president and to the Congress, right?

I mean, there seems-- I think if one has looked at the special inspector general reports, it's pretty clear that those reports believe that there was enormous amounts of spin. And of course, the press echoed a good bit of this spin.

And you can answer the question however you want, which is, based upon your intuitions or your sense of the individuals involved, was this a consequence of their own cloudy lenses seeing in Afghanistan, willful self-delusion, willful deception because of the dilemmas that Vanda pointed out? That you're kind of damned if you do, you're damned if you don't.

So one question was, what do you make of the way the war was portrayed? And how much should we care about that, right? Does it really turned out to be instrumental in sustaining the war? That this rosy view somehow managed to be promulgated.

And any of you can comment-- you don't have to give a big comment. You don't have to comment at all if you don't want to. Stick a hand up, or nod, or wink, or smile if you want to say something. Juan it looks like your mic might be off, so I'm thinking it--

JUAN COLE: No, my mic is on.

BARRY POSEN: I mean on. I mean your mic is on, so it like you want to talk, is what I'm going to say

JUAN COLE: Oh, I see. No, I didn't mean to signal that. But I see that Vanda put her hand up, and I think she's closest to this.

BARRY POSEN: OK. Vanda, why don't you go with that?

**VANDA
FELBAB-
BROWN:**

Well, for the entire two decades, there really was a fundamental discrepancy between portrayals coming from the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies, with the intelligence agencies being far more skeptical and pointing out the problems.

And what I often encountered in my travels in Afghanistan was sort of the military can-do culture that was very strong, but also for both the civilian and the militaries deployed within hours to those conditions, almost a necessity to believe.

And people would be working under tremendously difficult conditions, often risking their life. And even those who were on bases are not leaving out to interact with the populations would often work 18, 20-hour days for days on and on and on.

And so I would travel around Afghanistan, and after my travels, would come to the bases, and often bring a very, very negative, very discouraging picture that would challenge a lot of the core assumptions. And it was very, very hard for people to take in. They had to believe in what they were doing. Otherwise, why would they, as individuals there, or as organizations there, as commanders, be risking their lives and the lives of others?

I also want to suggest that the complexities of the assessments are enormous and should not be underestimated. I mentioned in my talk that the concluding chapter of my book *Aspiration and Ambivalence* speaks about all the problems that brought the Afghan security forces down. And I for the years, been a major critic. But even I didn't think they would go down in 10 days.

I mean, I thought we had months where there would be some opposition, some fighting. That we would see some contestation and the outcome [? would ?] be so bleak. And so you have to understand just how enormously difficult is to make these assumptions and predictions about people's behavior and what triggers people's behavior under particular circumstances. Let me leave it at that.

BARRY POSEN: So I'm going to ask-- again, I've tried to bring several questions together. This is a little speculative, and maybe it's a question for Juan. And it is kind of fundamental to this, which is, here are the Taliban basically fighting the richest country in the world-- and its Afghan allies, and/or proxies, and/or a mix of corrupt and uncorrupt friends. But looking at the question from the inside out, what's the glue that held the Talibs together in your opinion, Juan?

JUAN COLE: Oh, well I think that fighting to free their country of foreign occupation was very important. As Vanda rightly said, what we call the Taliban is not one thing. There were several groups who were more or less allied with one, another although they were as in fighting as well.

But you had the old Taliban of Mullah Omar, the archetypal Afghan refugees in northern Pakistan who went to seminary and kind of had an old school tie, who were very ideological. But then you had former US allies, the Haqqani group had fought the Soviets alongside the US, had received US money.

Why did the Haqqanis turn on us? And they attacked the US embassy, they attacked US troops. They seemed to have been in touch with a black cell inside the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence, is because they said they could not abide foreign troops in their country.

The same thing is true of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hezb-e-Islami, which was one of the seven Mujahideen groups, and was the most favored by the CIA and the ISI in the 1980s-- a close ally of the United States. And as soon as Marines landed in Kandahar in 2001, Hekmatyar was out.

So I really think that we think about the Taliban correctly as Muslim fundamentalists, and as driven by these theological impetuses, and so forth. But they are a mixture of that and a kind of rural Pashtun folk nationalism. And that's what these groups tend to have in common.

And I don't think that they're-- I mean, they have inducted Siraj Haqqani now in as more or less a co-commander of the military, and a maybe interior minister of a sort. So these various groups are-- and then Hekmatyar is dickering for some kind of a post. It's not clear he'll get one. You begin to see maybe some fissures, maybe some falling apart.

But while the US was there, that was the target. And the same things could be seen in Iraq, where the various Shiite militias didn't get along with one another, and certainly didn't get along with the Sunni militias. But you had points when the US was besieging Fallujah where the Shiites sent aid to the civilians of Fallujah against the Americans. So I think that was one big thing.

BARRY POSEN: Good. Vanda, you wanted to come in on this? Was that your hand up there?

**VANDA
FELBAB-
BROWN:** Yeah. I would add two other things. One is that the Taliban also had very effective leadership, particularly under Mullah Mansour in the crucial transformation after Omar. And more broadly beyond him, the Taliban made the decision not to adjudicate and decide all matters of internal rule before coming to power because it precisely knew that when it came to the division of particular spoils, whether its political portfolios, economic divisions, or rule, it will run into tremendous problems.

And so it was punting the can down the road, down the road, down the road, until after they were in power because they knew that if they start getting into that earlier, it would blow up on them. And the Taliban already did suffer fragmentation, which brings us to Islamic State in Khorasan that has both foreign fighters, but at the core were Taliban commanders who Mullah Mansour fired from the Taliban because he profoundly disliked their policies-- a crucial one was the decision what they wanted to start a sectarian war against the Shia, and what Mansour wanted to avoid.

There were other fissures that were essentially a preview of the fissures playing out now that Mansour dealt with by pushing them out, marginalizing them, and firing them from the Taliban. And then the rest of the leadership avoiding those decisions.

BARRY POSEN: So I want to ask Carol a question. Your whole talk addressed this, but I think the questioner wants to sort of get you to focus just a bit more on it. Given that we had the reports of the Russians providing some sort of support to some of the Taliban at various points in the last several years,

You made the point, Carol, that the Russians just get kind of a certain glee out of needling us because they're getting their own back in their own-- you know, because we did it to them in Afghanistan. But what's your net net? I know you kind of went on both sides of the issue.

Do you think-- if you had to make a prediction here, do you think the Russians played with fire and they're going to live to regret this? Or do you think that they're clever enough to ride all these horses that are now loose in that part of the world and play them off one against the other and somehow do well out of it?

CAROL

SAIVETZ:

I think that it's a short-term gain, which is what I alluded to in my talks. That longer term, I think that it could be very problematic for the Russians for any number of reasons that I tried to lay out very briefly. They're terrified of-- and I don't think that's too strong a word. I think that they are really scared of any kind of threat of Islamist terrorism overtaking Russia again.

I mean, you think about the Beslan massacre, think about all these other episodes in Russia itself. And I'm very taken with this idea that there is-- and maybe, Juan, you can add to this-- that there is sort of a threat in the example of the Taliban success against the United States. Could that reinvigorate groups that existed, and that the Uzbeks, and other countries were very concerned about 5, 10 years ago because, again, they've been lying dormant, and all of a sudden there is this example there and possibly help coming from across the border?

I also want to go back to some the first question that you're asked. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan was really very similar to ours. They sort of tried to "communize--" I'm putting it in quotation marks" the countryside. They would send people out to communize the land, to create collectives and everything.

And an hour later, the local mullah would go out into the countryside and say it's against Allah's principles to have communal ownership of the land, don't do it. So that all that localism actually prevented the Soviets from controlling the country even as they occupied it for 10 years.

I think the one thing that probably stunned us as we were looking at it is that Najibullah lasted for a year and a half, two years-- I forget what the exact amount of time is-- after the Soviets withdrew. And our guys left even before we finalized the withdrawal-- Ghani, I mean.

So I think that we are learning from the Soviet experience was that perhaps the central government would last longer than it did. But we didn't look at the Soviet experience in being unable actually to control the countryside and to control the very local conditions that prevailed there.

BARRY POSEN: I'm going to take the privilege of the chair and ask a question, which I think Vanda and Juan both touched on, but I think I want to be slightly more precise. It appears that the Talibs in this 20 year rebellion did a better job of co-opting Tajiks and Uzbeks than they did in the-- when they governed in the past and in the previous rebellion.

There seemed to be some faint hope at the end among sort of pundits that somehow these old ethnic fissures would come apart, that the traditional warlords would come out of the woodwork, and the same ones that were around 20 years ago and somehow flip things against the Taliban or put their shoulders to the wheel.

All of that localist kind of ethnic loyalty and the local warlord organization, whether it was Dostum, or Ismail Khan, or those people. They seem to have been much, much weaker this time around. The Talibs seem to somehow have co-opted locals into their struggle. And Vanda, you mentioned that the government that's been formed doesn't seem to give much to those folk.

So I'm wondering, am I right that they did a better job in the rebellion in doing this? And is the fact that they seem to have gone binary in this interim government and are excluding the people whose alliances they basically needed-- are they at a more fragile moment for themselves than maybe we might think?

And of course, obviously this is speculation, it's tea leaf reading. But it is kind of notable that Uzbeks and Tajiks don't seem to have resisted very hard.

**VANDA
FELBAB-
BROWN:**

If I can start, your basic observation, Barry, is absolutely correct. The Taliban was very purposeful over the past 20 years, particularly the last decade, in trying to mobilize cadres within the minorities.

They had Tajik fighters and they have Tajik commanders. And, in fact, the man who represents the Tajik in the Taliban government is one of those. They also for years played a very determined game with the various power brokers, including some of the people you mentioned and were bargaining with them.

Now how the bargaining ended is very fascinating, with many people that were mentioned-- people like Hekmatyar, Atta-- either pulling back from the bargain because they thought if they can stand firm on the ground, they will end up with better deals, and ultimately ended up doing nothing and are just washed out force.

But they also-- and more importantly-- bargained with underground militias beneath them. And really, their cleverness was neutralizing through bargaining, through not so much political co-optation as more promises and delivery of local economic rents with the fighters.

So they had a two-pronged approach. One was bargaining with the top power brokers who were bargaining constantly with the Ghani and Karzai governments before, and constantly quarreling with each other, and ultimately catastrophically overplayed their hand. Atta, for example, had several deals, walked away from them at the last minute. And they bargained with the militias on the ground and co-opted them.

But right now, the Taliban is behaving politically in a very greedy manner. And that's not just folly. That's partially driven by the own internal within Taliban division. And those divisions don't allow the Taliban to be as generous as it needs to be to sustain itself in power.

And so they crashed upon [INAUDIBLE] opposition, but there is a lot of grumbling from the Tajik quarters-- and not just [? Tajik ?] quarters, also from non-Southern Pashtuns. The Taliban government is very heavily southern Pashtun. And so you're hearing a lot of disquiet that will not immediately translate into an armed rebellion, but that will be a major challenge for the Taliban to maintain stability.

BARRY POSEN: So we've sort of come to the hour, even though as these things go, the Q&A keeps-- it's an ever normal Q&A that keeps growing from the bottom and I keep having to return to it and try and synthesize two or three questions. But I think we're sort of at the limit of our time here.

So I want to thank our three speakers. I think you've all provided a lot of extra perspective on what, as Vanda observed, is a very tragic chapter and tragic outcome, but a tragic chapter in a 20-year book. So it's been a long, and frustrating, and sad event. But also, we should remember it's been hard on the Afghans.

Endless war, living for 20 years in a society at endless war is really something, we Americans have no experience of it. You can go back and look at the four years of the American Civil War and see what that was like, but that even doesn't begin to cut it. We were not one of the poorest countries in the world then. We were already a very rich country.

So this is a tragedy, much of which appeared off stage that we did not see. And I want to at least note a question in the chat, which I'm not going to ask you to talk about, but reminding us that this is a very poor country. And as Vanda pointed out, hunger is stalking Afghanistan.

And not just a small portion of it, a very big portion of it, in part because the state grew with this immense fountain of outside resources which are now not there. So the West has a lot of deep ethical choices to make here about its relationships, not just with the Talibs, but with the Afghan people.

So with that, I'm going to thank everyone, aside from thanking the speakers who have been great-- been great for me. I want to thank you all out there in our-- for extended family. Thank you for attending today's forum. And I want to thank the MIT CIS again and the MIT Security Studies Program for their help.

And I'm obliged to remind you that we do these things all the time and you should check our calendar for future events. And those will-- they'll be organized more or less the same way. So I want to thank you all for being with us today and wish you a good afternoon.