

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Online Event

“The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) High-Risk List”

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FEATURING:

John F. Sopko,

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)

CSIS EXPERTS:

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Anthony H.
Cordesman:

Good morning. I'm Anthony Cordesman and I hold the Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I have the pleasure this morning of introducing John Sopko, who's the special inspector general for Afghan reconstruction. And he is talking about some of the critical risks that affect not only our current posture in Afghanistan, but which will be equally critical in shaping the prospects for either any kind of peace settlement or the decisions we might have to make if that peace doesn't prove to be possible.

I think he is raising critical issues this morning, but I have to compliment John and his staff. Their work has been remarkably objective, remarkably informed. It's probed into some of the most critical issues we face. And all I can say is several centuries ago, when I was involved at the collapse of Vietnam, how much I wish we had a body like SIGAR that could have provided the objective insight that's so critical to dealing with this kind of situation.

John.

John F. Sopko:

Well, thank you for that kind introduction. And good morning to everyone who's watching. I want to thank, obviously, Tony for hosting me today, as well as CSIS, which we've had a long and fruitful relationship with since I became the SIGAR. As Tony mentioned, I'm here this morning to release SIGAR's 2021 High-Risk List. I hope you can see it. It exists and it's up on our web. You can find it at www.sigar.mil. It highlights, as Tony mentioned, eight key threats to America's \$143 billion investment in Afghan reconstruction and ultimate peace in Afghanistan. These reports are issued before each new Congress. And is the fourth High-Risk List SIGAR has issued under my leadership and the third I've had the privilege of releasing here at CSIS.

You know, in planning for today's presentation I was reminded by a colleague of mine of something Aristotle said over 2,000 years ago, quote, that "it is more difficult to organize peace than to win a war, but the fruits of victory will be lost if the peace is not well organized." That is why I think many of you may agree with me that today's report may be the most important High-Risk List that SIGAR has produced to date, since it addresses not only serious risks to ultimate peace and now peace is organized, but also comes at a most critical juncture. For the first time since U.S. forces entered Afghanistan in October 2001, a clock is truly ticking on America's longest war. May 1st, a mere 52 days from now, is the date upon which U.S. forces under the terms of the Trump administration's agreement with the Taliban, are to fully withdraw from Afghanistan.

Now, as many of you are aware, multiple reports from Kabul over the last few days indicate that the Biden administration is pursuing a new effort to end the war and bring peace to that country. The situation obviously

remains extremely fluid. But notably, as reported in the press, Secretary of State Blinken sent a letter to President Ghani that emphasized that a withdrawal of U.S. forces by May 1st still remains under consideration. Now, U.S. forces right now stand at the lowest level since 2011, at 2,500. And 98 percent below their peak. As Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin have stated before Congress, it remains in our nation's interest to ensure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven or breeding ground for terrorists that can harm the United States.

This has been one of the goals of America's reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, to help build a stable government with strong security forces to support the counterterrorism mission. After inheriting an agreement and a deadline, the Biden administration and the new Congress must decide the future of both our counterterrorism and our reconstruction missions in Afghanistan.

Now, before I go any further, let me just put one caveat on this report and what I'm speaking about. Neither SIGAR nor today's report takes a position on what those future missions should look like. That's not the role of an inspector general. Nor do we have an opinion about the future presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. As an inspector general, we leave these decisions to the policymakers. But what this report does do is highlight current and future risks to the reconstruction goals in Afghanistan – risks that we believe will remain relevant as long as the reconstruction missions continues, regardless of what diplomatic and political agreements might be reached going forward.

Now as I noted two years ago when I released our last High-Risk List, Afghanistan faces a multitude of challenges, many of which have been exacerbated since then. Continued insecurity, uncertain post-peace settlement funding, the challenge of reintegrating fighters, endemic corruption, lagging economic growth, threats to women's rights, the illicit narcotics trade, and overall inadequate oversight by donors are the areas that we, at SIGAR, believe pose risks to both the Afghan state and American national security interests there.

Now, while some have suggested that the United States may be able to achieve its counterterrorism and reconstruction objectives in Afghanistan from, quote/unquote, "over the horizon," I think most would agree with us that the best chances of achieving those objectives is to be able to partner with a strong, stable, democratic, and self-reliant Afghan state. But right now, that state is under threat. In the wake of the February 22, 2020 withdrawal agreement, all is not well. Compromise appears in short supply on either side. Taliban attacks have actually increased since the agreement was signed.

Assassination of prominent officials, activists, journalists, aid workers, and others have also increased, including an unsuccessful attack on one of the

female members of the peace negotiating team. And a Taliban offensive on Kandahar City last October as peace negotiations were ongoing may well have succeeded were it not for U.S. air support. Peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban have achieved little for Afghanistan so far, and only time will tell as to whether the new Biden administration initiative will bear fruit. And the Afghan people's fears for its own government's survival are exacerbated by the knowledge of how dependent their country is on foreign military and financial support.

Now, if the goal of our reconstruction effort was to build a strong, stable, self-reliant Afghan state that could protect our national security interests as well as Afghanistan's, it is a mission yet to be accomplished and may turn out to be a bridge too far. While the world's attention has been on the potential withdrawal of the 2,500 U.S. and over 7,000 coalition soldiers in the country, Afghanistan's dependence on international financial and logistical support for its security forces may well be a more critical concern. And it's one I would like to discuss this morning in a little more detail.

Let's consider the numbers. Almost 80 percent of Afghanistan's \$11 billion in public expenditures in 2018 – the most recent year figures are available – was covered by international donors. And things have not gotten any better since then. Of the almost \$4.3 billion that the Defense Department estimates is required to fund Afghanistan's security forces in fiscal year 2021, the Afghan government plans to contribute just \$610 million. Now, that is a seemingly paltry contribution, but one that represents approximately 24 percent of Afghanistan's total estimated domestic revenue.

Further, the Defense Department has reported to it that it no longer considers the long-held of a financially self-sustaining Afghan security force by 2024 to be realistic. All the while, the Afghan government may be learning that after nearly two decades of financial support, the patience and interest of international donors may not be infinite after all. Take, for example, the most recent Afghanistan donor conference, held virtually in Geneva this past November. Participants from 66 countries and 32 international organizations pledged approximately \$3.3 billion in development aid for 2021, with annual commitments expected to stay at the same level through 2024.

Now, this was a significant reduction from the amounts pledged in 2016. And when combined with another 3.6 billion (dollars) in security assistance, is close to the bare minimum experts believe is necessary to preserve Afghanistan as a viable state. Further cuts in funding, in their opinion, could be highly destabilizing to Afghanistan. Compounding matters, as today's report indicates, the Afghan government still cannot manage the money it current receives from international donors, particularly when it comes to the finances of its security forces.

For example, the U.S. believes the Afghan government may be several more years away from their promise to take over ownership, management, and sustainment of a payroll system which the United States gave and cost us \$50 million, which is used to ensure that the U.S. taxpayers are not paying for Afghan ghost soldiers who exist only on paper, and that military and police salaries do not end up in the pockets of corrupt officials rather than the policeman and the soldier.

Another equally seriously threat to Afghanistan's stability has also largely been ignored as we focus on the boots on the ground in Afghanistan. And that is the provision of last year's U.S.-Taliban agreement that stipulates that in addition to the departure of U.S. and coalition troops, all non-diplomatic civilian personnel – private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting service personnel – also must leave the country by May 1st. Should this come to pass, SIGAR and many others believe this may be more devastating to the effectiveness of the Afghan security forces than the withdrawal of our remaining troops.

Why is that? Because the Afghan government relies heavily on these foreign contractors and trainers to function. In the first quarter of fiscal year 2021 there were over 18,000 Defense Department contractors in Afghanistan, including 6,000 Americans and 7,000 third-country nationals, 40 percent of whom are responsible for logistics, maintenance, or training tasks. Now, it is well known that the Afghan security forces need these contractors to maintain their equipment, manage supply chains, and train their military and police to operate the advanced equipment that we have purchased for them.

For example, as of December the Afghan National Army was completing just under 20 percent of its own maintenance work orders, well below the goal of 80 percent that was set, and the 51 percent that they did in 2018. So it's actually going down. The Afghan National Police were just as bad, if not worse, undertaking only 12 percent of their own maintenance work against a target of 35 percent, and less than the 16 percent that we reported in our 2019 High-Risk List.

Additionally, and more troubling, the Department of Defense's train, advise, and assist command Air, or commonly called TAC-Air, recently reported that since late 2019 they have reduced their personnel in Afghanistan by 94 percent, and that the military drawdown now requires near total use of contract support to maintain the Afghan air fleet. They assess that, quote, "Further drawdown and the associated closure of bases will effectively end all in-country aviation training contracts in Afghanistan."

Again, why is this significant? Why do we view this as a high list? Namely, because contractors currently provide 100 percent of the maintenance for the Afghan Air Force UH-60 helicopters and C-130 cargo aircraft, and a significant portion of Afghan's light combat support aircraft. TAC-Air this

January gave a bleak assessment, namely that no Afghan airframe can be sustained as combat effective for more than a few months in the absence of contractor support.

Now, building Afghanistan security forces, including its air force, has been by far the most expensive portion of U.S. reconstruction efforts there. But even if U.S. financial assistance continues, the lack of enough experienced and trained Afghan personnel, combined with the absence of U.S. military and contact support in Afghanistan, will negatively impact the Afghan security forces, threaten the Afghan state, and imperil our own national security interests should Afghanistan further destabilize.

Now, on the one hand, we should also remember another thing, that Afghanistan's reliance on reconstruction assistance is really a double-edged sword and presents not only risks – which I've talked about – but also some opportunities to the donor community going forward. As I have noted, and our report details, a potential peace may be threatened if donor financial assistance is reduced too much, too fast, or if donors insist on conditions that cannot be achieved either by the Afghan government or the Taliban, if they're part of that government.

However, continued funding for U.S. reconstruction programs aimed at promoting economic development, rule of law, respect for human rights, good governance, and security for the Afghan people may be more significant because it may be the primary lever left for the U.S. and other donors to influence that country. It appears that even the Taliban understand Afghanistan's dire need for foreign assistance because as one of the few commitments that the U.S. had to make last year was, quote, "to seek economic cooperation for reconstruction with the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government," unquote.

Now, how much the donor community wishes to stay involved will, of course, depend on what that government looks like and how it behaves. Numerous officials, including then-Secretary of State Pompeo and Ambassador Khalilzad have stated that the U.S. will be able to advance its human rights goals, including the rights of women and girls, with the Taliban by leveraging or conditioning this much-needed financial assistance. But unfortunately, as SIGAR has long reported, even when conditionality involved only dealing with the Afghan government, donors do not have a stellar record of successfully utilizing that conditionality to influence Afghan behavior.

That said, the basic risk facing the current and any potential post-peace Afghan government is whether future foreign assistance levels during this uncertain period will be sufficient to prevent its collapse. Now, the recent donor conference I alluded to before provided some assurance but also some concerns.

On the one hand, the amounts pledged at the November donor conference for civilian non-security assistance to the Afghan government represents a 15 percent decrease compared to the amount pledged four years earlier. The amount pledged, if fulfilled, as I noted, comes close to the \$3 billion in donor assistance for civilian expenditures that Overseas Development Institute researchers determined was the minimum yearly amount necessary to preserve the Afghan state's functionality. They found that an additional 3.6 billion (dollars) would be required for security, for which they noted the U.S. is presently the only major donor.

On the other hand, the World Bank has estimated that the costs of implementing a peace agreement would require an additional \$5.2 billion in additional civilian assistance through 2024. This is above and beyond the 6.6 billion (dollars) which is the bare minimum to keep the Afghan government afloat. But without continued donor support and the associated leverage that would come with it, any post-peace government may be unlikely to sustain efforts on areas of great concerns to donors, including the United States, including the protection of the rights of women and girls.

While all Afghans have a stake in the negotiations that are underway, Afghan women and girls have reason for particular concern about the outcome given the treatment they faced during the period of Taliban rule. As SIGAR's recent Lessons Learned Report on U.S. efforts to support gender equality notes, real gains have been made over the last 19 years, particularly in the areas of health care and education for women. But while challenges persist, there are significant fears that should the Taliban enter a government, what fragile progress that has been made will be rolled back. And I should note: Recent actions by the Taliban have not been reassuring.

And while U.S. officials involved in negotiating the U.S.-Taliban agreement have said the leverage of U.S. financial assistance will provide the carrot and stick to induce any post-peace Afghan government to respect the rights of women and girls, the withholding of the assistance may actually lead to greater insecurity. And women and girls could suffer as a result.

As ever, in Afghanistan one must always be wary of the law of unintended consequences. And as we highlight in today's report, one of those unintended consequences of our reconstruction effort over the last 20 years – namely, corruption – continue to fester as international donors have, in their own self-interest, entered into a devil's bargain with successive Afghan governments to provide enormous amounts of financial assistance that, paradoxically, may have ended up undermining the entire military and reconstruction effort.

Now, since I became the SIGAR nearly a decade ago, we have reported that foreign assistance distorted the Afghan economy and exacerbated the corruption problem. Moreover, international donors, including the U.S.,

have largely failed to use their leverage to insist on more robust anti-corruption efforts by the Afghan government. As an inspector general, my primary concern about corruption in Afghanistan is that U.S. taxpayer dollars are not wasted or misused. But beyond that, Afghanistan's endemic corruption provides the oxygen to the insurgency and undermines the actual Afghan government we're trying to help.

Back in 2014, former ISAF Commanding General John Allen was not hyperbolic when he told Congress that corruption, not the Taliban, was the existential threat to the Afghan government and our mission there. Yet, for all the anticorruption benchmarks and spreadsheets that we've seen being – (inaudible, technical difficulties) – between foreign embassies in Kabul and the presidential palace, the Afghan government's anticorruption efforts remain largely ineffectual. We at SIGAR have repeatedly noted that the Afghan government too often makes paper reforms – drafting regulations, holding meetings, attending international conferences – rather than taking concrete actions like arresting powerful Afghans on corruption charges.

Now, I don't want to be all pessimistic. This doesn't mean that positive change cannot happen. Our work has found that the Afghan government can improve and tends to take some meaningful action when donors are engaged, speak with one voice, and call for specific reforms to curb systemic corruption. Unfortunately, I believe that the donors missed a key opportunity at the November donor conference to do that and make some real improvements. The anticorruption framework agreed to at the conference falls short because it fails to outline specific financial consequences for the Afghan government if it fails to meet its anticorruption obligations. It is troubling when you think of it that even at this pivotal time the donors did not have either the political or bureaucratic will to place hard, concrete, anticorruption conditions on our foreign assistance.

It makes one wonder, if not now when we will be able to? The Afghan government is severely dependent on international assistance. Its grip on power may be slipping away. And still it appears international donors were not able to condition further assistance to the Afghan government with specific penalties if their anticorruption efforts fail to improve. Just as troubling, the international donors at the same conference also did not include counter-narcotics efforts among the conditions for further assistance. This too we believe was another missed opportunity for donors to demand measurable improvements to address one of the major sources of corruption, as well as financial support for the insurgency.

A key lesson we at SIGAR have exposed is that donor governments have to be willing to say "no" and pull money back, not only to protect their taxpayers but because a corrupt narcotic-fueled Afghan state will never be a reliable partner able to protect itself or the interests of the United States or its donors. Now while the Afghan government has been able to escape such

conditions in the past, today our report suggests the donor community should realize the Afghan government is focused on a single goal: Its survival. Afghanistan is more dependent on international support than ever before. It may not be an overstatement that if foreign assistance is withdrawn and peace negotiations fail, Taliban forces could be at the gates of Kabul in short order.

After all, we must remember, it was when the rubles from Moscow stopped coming, not when the Soviet troops withdrew, that Afghanistan last descended into the chaos of civil war. Even if the Taliban doesn't threaten the stability of the Afghan government, the Afghan people – 85 percent of whom state that corruption is a problem in their daily lives – may do the job for them.

As Samantha Power, President Biden's nominee for USAID administrator, recently wrote in Foreign Policy, quote, "Anger over corruption and misconduct has been a driving force behind a surge in mass mobilizations around the world." And apropos of today's event, Tony, I should note that in her article – which is a very good article; I recommend everybody read it – she sites CSIS data that of the 37 major protest movements that occurred in 2019, opposition to corruption played a role in roughly half, leading in many cases to leaders' resignations and changes in government.

So let me conclude. If the Afghan government – whether it includes the Taliban or not – wants the support of both international donors and its own population, it must take concrete action to tackle corruption as well as protect human rights, especially the rights of women and girls. And if international donors want both a stable, secure, democratic Afghanistan, well as public support to continue assistance to Afghanistan, they must take meaningful action to incentivize the Afghan government to do the right thing.

Make no mistake, Afghanistan is at an inflection point. While the gravity of the decisions that will need to be made about the number of boots on the ground and the future form of the Afghan government are quite sobering, decisions about our future financial commitment to Afghanistan are equally so. And just as critical to the success of our nearly 20-year-old counterterrorism and reconstruction objectives there. Thank you very much and I look forward to questions.

Anthony H.
Cordesman:

Tom, thank you very much. I think you've raised a number of critical issues. I am going to take just a few minutes to go beyond what you could deal with, because we do now have a deadline. And as you've pointed out in your remarks, it's critical. May 30th is fine, but you don't have till May 30th. That's the deadline for removing U.S. and contractor forces and, presumably – although it's unclear – most of the NATO forces as well. The problem is, if you are going to move those forces out, you have to have some kind of interim government or peace process in place well before that deadline.

And as yet, we don't have substantive negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban that get into the specifics.

Now, we do have a letter from Secretary Blinken and some detailed peace proposals. These aren't public yet, but they have been reported in TOLONews in Afghanistan, along with the full peace proposal. And it raises another critical issue. That is, if you go through the list of those peace proposals, most of them require the Taliban to virtually turn away from its declared ideology and previous statements about the Afghan government. It basically requires a shift. And on the one hand, it also requires the Afghan government – the one with all the weaknesses you've cited – to turn over about half of the positions to the Taliban's representatives. But it then assumes that the interim president, who may never effectively take a political role after that position, has the deciding vote.

So we are now looking at all of the issues you've raised and the very complex peace proposal, which evidently has provoked already – although we haven't seen it publicly – criticism from President Ghani and no clear reaction from the Taliban, which in many ways would have to give up element after element of its ideology to participate. I think you've pointed out the cost. Let me also say that some of your other reporting has shown that it isn't just the money that's involved, it's how much of it has been wasted. For example, in your of your studies on aid, civil aid and construction and benefits to the Afghans, less than 20 percent of the money resulted in a functioning facility or actual construction or service that emerged as meeting the needs of Afghans.

We're not talking about minor levels of waste. We are talking, as we look at World Bank reporting and other reporting on the Afghan economy, not only about a society where the only major industry earning hard currency in the entire country is narcotics, but a country where at one point we'd reduced poverty rates to about 38 percent of the population, and they've now risen to 68 percent. So we're talking about how do you actually make this system work? And you mentioned 5.3 billion (dollars) in World Bank aid. The problem with those figures, and all of them – from the IMF and everywhere else – is they assume the money is spent honestly and effectively in a unified, efficient, and timely way, without regard to faction, internal tension, power broker, or any other problem. Which is a little like saying that if the U.S. had a perfect economy and a perfect political system it would cost X, as distinguished from what we actually do.

If we look at government – and you cited corruption, and it's a critical issue that's raised by virtually everyone. But one of the problems is that, as nearly as we can figure out, in much of the countryside the Taliban has scored major gains. And in much of the countryside, the government that is the supposed central government has no real presence. For example, in its local district government one report indicates that less than half of those district governments have a functioning prosecutor. In other words, their

legal system is not working in much of the country. A lot of these are rural. The numbers aren't very good. But what we are talking about is an increase in rural areas, and particularly outside even the district capital, in Taliban interested gains, or even in the Taliban becoming the real justice system.

You mentioned the problems with the Afghan National Forces. Reporting I've seen struck me very much as what I saw in the Pentagon as a civilian assistant to the deputy secretary during the collapse in Vietnam. You didn't create the support, the sustainment, the capability to actually get to the combat units key elements of what they need. Elite units became more and more important, and reporting coming out of some of those elite units, including Afghan Special Forces, indicates they no longer have the intelligence and air support they did in December. One of your figures shows that the Afghan police can only maintain about 12 percent of their equipment. So it isn't just the Army or the military. The police are supposed to hold, be the presence of the government.

Other reports show effectively in many areas the government no longer can control or secure the highways or basic lines of communication. There are checkpoints, but many of these checkpoints are no longer manned by actual forces, and others are manned by the Taliban. I think the problem we really face is we have no objective reporting at all on what the actual success of the Taliban is relative to the central government, or even how the central government governs relative to power brokers and narcotics. Other figures that I think really are troublesome, and some of your reporting has addressed this, how many of these areas actually have preserved or improved the areas – or rights of women? The letter from Secretary Blinken is very clear about preserving human rights, the progress that's made for women.

But it touches on the areas where the government is in control. And here, this I think raises the question: Can we make a peace work? And if we can't make a peace work, and we have very, very little time, given all the challenges you raise, what do we do then? Because isn't a matter of keeping 2,000 or 4,000 troops. It's a matter of keeping an Afghan government alive at every level – police, army, day-to-day operations. Somehow doing it with the war going on and potentially bringing contractors and Americans back as targets because the peace process has not succeeded. And this raises a question which I think we really now have to begin to address.

You mentioned, and let me just conclude with that, the issue of can you afford to leave a potential area for terrorist action? Well, the problem with that question is, relative to what? Because if you look at the map of Africa, or Asia, or Central Asia, if you look at the Middle East, the number of areas where other terrorist movements now do present a threat, many of them much more direct in terms of threats to Europeans, our strategic partners in Asia or our strategic partners in the Middle East, where do we concentrate our resources? What kind of gains – (audio break) – if we leave

Afghanistan, what is the pressure that puts on China, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia – (inaudible) – if the Taliban does not choose – I think all of this goes back to the point you raised in opening.

These aren't theoretical questions. One way or another, we have to answer all of them by the end of May, or indeed well before. And the other issue is, in many cases – given your numbers – it means bringing many thousands of contractors or military or advisors back into an Afghanistan, where we have removed many intelligence assets, air power, and the ability to administer aid in the field. I guess what really scares me are the deadlines. And with that, let's open things up for questions.

And I think one of these questions is basically a good one to begin with. What do you say to the argument that the U.S. has invested too much – (audio break) – is this a good enough argument? Let me ask – (audio break) –

John F. Sopko:

Yeah, if the question is how – if we put the question – (audio break) – tell you how well we're doing – (audio break) – emphasized in your presentation was the policy decisions. I don't do policy. I don't. And no IGs should do policy. (Audio break) – our job. We look at the process. But what we're saying is these are risks. And I wholly commend you for highlighting we've got a lot of questions we have to answer and decisions to make in 52 days. And they involve all of the things we just talked about, and what is throwing good money after bad.

Now, it all depends on really a policy decision on counterterrorism. Do we need to be there, or can we do it over the horizon? And also a policy decision on, you know, does this send the wrong message, if we leave? Leaving our friends in Afghanistan in the lurch, particularly women and girls, but also all of the soldiers, the civil servants, and all of the great Afghans which I know you have met in your visits, I've gone there, until COVID, four times a year and spent a lot of time over the last decade talking to some really brave Afghans. Do we leave them in the lurch? I mean, these are questions we faced when we left Vietnam. These are questions we faced when we left Iraq.

But those are beyond my pay grade. And again, I apologize to any of the viewers who thought I was going to tell them exactly what we should do in Afghanistan. That's not my job. My job is to highlight the risks. And I will say this: Those risks that we highlighted today aren't going away. (Laughs.) They do not miraculously disappear May 1st or whatever the date is. So we got to face them. And maybe the reason we're in such a dilemma is despite the 300 or 400 reports that we've issued, and GAO's issued them, and all the other IGs who work there have issued them, we haven't really addressed these problems. They are problems – I feel like, you know, the movie actor in Groundhog Day. I mean, I'm repeating the

same thing time and time again. And the policymakers – and that means Congress and whichever administration – have got to face these problems.

Anthony H.
Cordesman:

You know, I think, John, you're absolutely correct. One aspect of this question, though, that I would address is what do you say the argument we've invested too much in Afghanistan to withdraw before a government to our liking can exist unchallenged? One key point raised is Vietnam, it was a brutal point to have to raise, is it doesn't matter how much you've spent in the past if you can't justify spending money in the future. It's relevant because it is the opportunities you have now that really count. And that does depend, as Secretary Blinken has pointed out, on the actions of the Afghan central government.

And no matter what happens, any peace proposal that includes the Taliban is not going to be a government, in many ways, to our liking. No matter what happens, if you do have a peace proposal one way or another you're going to be dealing with the Taliban and all of its problems and its extremism as part of that government indefinitely into the future. Those aren't choices where you can say: We'll stay until we have bought success or because we have spent money in the past we should spend it in the future.

I think too – there are two questions here about can an Afghan government function on its own without international assistance, and if so when? And I'd just say, from what you have said earlier, the answer is twofold. One, we simply don't know when, even with conditionality, we could actually say they will not need massive amounts of security aid to stabilize whatever agreement is reached, if one can be, and to keep the economy functioning. It isn't just a matter of the current government and its corruption. Looking at World Bank and other reporting, given the population, hyper-urbanization, problems with water, problems with the devastation caused by war, no one can predict the point at which Afghanistan will be able to stand on its own.

John F. Sopko:

Tony, if I can add to that, I think we're pretty clear in this report – and I think many of the other donors realize that too, is if we don't provide financial support, at a minimum – but then you also have questions about technical support – but financial support, the Afghan government will collapse. It cannot survive on its own with the amount of money. Now, it will survive in one way. I mean, I'll just be a lot smaller, a lot less effective. And, you know, the fight with the Taliban is going to be even worse, or any other insurgent groups.

So I think we can clearly state that. I mean, there is a delta between what the Afghans raise in revenue, legally, and what the government costs, which is a lot bigger. And I forget what the delta is now. It's about 6 billion (dollars) or so – 5-6 billion (dollars). But that'll only grow. And then what we add about the World Bank estimating, they're saying is if you got peace

there's going to be additional costs, and somebody's got to pay for it. The Afghans can't.

And again, this is – this is one of those issues we have been talking about, and I think other commentators like you and other IGs have been saying, is lookit: For 20 years we realized the Afghan government couldn't support this, could not pay for this, had not ability to sustain a military this size, an air force this size, roads, and all this other stuff we gave them. So why did we give it to them? And that's – when you alluded to the number of buildings – we just came out in the report, the capital assets that, you know, haven't been used. Well, they can't afford them.

So if anything there's a lessons learned here the next time we do this. And I know the audience may say, oh, we're never going to do an Afghanistan again. Yeah, we will. We've probably got plans on the – on the blackboard right now. I mean, we will go in with – like gangbusters in some poor country that needs assistance or is fighting an insurgency, and we're going to open the – I hope we don't. But there's a tendency we don't learn from our mistakes. That's why General Allen and others told us years ago to set up a lessons learned program that maybe we at least can write the lessons and what we learned from them, and what worked and didn't work, and, you know, that's the reports we've alluded to.

But, you know, this has been a horrible waste of taxpayer money in many regards. And we can learn from that. Now, let me just throw one other thing out, Tony. I mean, a lot of the waste was early on. Actually doing – we can actually do more with less. And that's another thing we talk about. Be more directed in your assistance. Be more directed in your programs. And so it's not all negative. I mean, if we stay in Afghanistan there is a smart way to do this. And you can use smart conditionality. I just hope that Congress and the administration take some of the advice that us and other IGs have given them over the years.

Anthony H.
Cordesman:

I think you raise some critical issues. And I think we should also mention two things. One, when you don't provide aid from the outside, you have a country whose only real capacity to earn today is to export narcotics. Now, no one has said anything about counter-narcotics and the impact of the peace process. Basically, our own narcotics programs, as you point out and others have, failed completely. Basically, Afghanistan now faces only one real problem, synthetic drugs. It isn't counter-narcotics efforts. So we have to bear that in mind.

The other thing is, when we talk about Afghan corruption, we need to remember that World Bank, IMF, Transparency International, a host of other groups, this corruption is endemic in much of the world. The Afghan regime is scarcely unique. It's just the place where we are fighting. And the conditionality you raise could be easily applied. What on Earth do you do when it comes to Yemen? What happens in trying to have recovery in Syria,

or in Iraq, which has roughly similar levels of corruption, or in Lebanon, which is described as one of the most corrupt governments in the world? So one way or another we have to come to grips with this issue. It isn't something where we can say: You leave Afghanistan and go somewhere else. Where else? Somalia? These are questions which as a country, a global power, we're going to have to answer.

I don't know. Let me give you a few minutes if you have some final comments to make, because I think you've given us a critical introduction to the realities of what we face. And it is not 2024 or some indefinite date in the future. It isn't even May 31st. Basically, this has to be made to work now or we face the collapse of the process where we really have no alternatives.

John F. Sopko:

Well, let me conclude by just saying, as pessimistic as we have, you know, sounded I want to end on a little bit of an optimistic note. All is not lost. You know, these are tough issues. As you know, Tony, I spend a lot of time up in Maine. And they have a favorite phrase about wickedly difficult things. Well, this is wickedly difficult. The deadline and then the state of play in Afghanistan, and you've got to make these decisions, to some extent, or hold off the Taliban from enforcing their part of the agreement for 52 days or 56 days, how many it is. But you know, we can come out on the other side, if the policymakers decide to do so, with a more targeted reconstruction program, more targeted assistance.

And we all are hoping for peace. I mean, that is the way Afghanistan's going to survive, is they got to work out a peace deal. Now one thing we've learned on corruption, on a lot of things, gender issues – our Lessons Learned Report talks about that too – is, you know, we can't impose our values on another country. They have to want to fix it. They have to want to fix the problem they have with many of the women in Afghanistan are being treated like they live in the 4th century.

They have to fix the endemic corruption problem, where prime ministers and ministers and whatever can take money and just fly all over the country and all of that. They have to fix the problems that created the Taliban which, ironically, if you read the reports done by many people, including yourself, Tony, you talk about the Taliban arose to some extent as a reaction to the corruption and, the irony is the human rights violations being conducted by the government at that time.

So but these they got to fix. We can help them. But we got to get out of this idea that we can impose everything. We can condition. We can walk away. We can add money, subtract money, whatever. But it basically boils down to this is an Afghan issue that they have to address. We as partners, as comrades in arms as well as comrades in aid and assistance, can help. But they have to fix it. And they can, with our assistance and the assistance of

other aid people. And if we learn from our prior mistakes, we can do a lot better job going forward.

Anthony H.
Cordesman:

Tom, thank you very much. I think that you've given us a superb introduction to probably one of the most critical problems we face as a country. And I think it is wise to end on a positive note. And let me just say in fairness to the administration that Secretary Blinken does raise in his peace proposals the possibility of shifting these deadlines and negotiating on a broader level over more time. So there are at least some options, even in the short term, for moving forward.

And ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for watching.

John F. Sopko:

Thank you, Tony.

(END)