

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT  
Online Event

**“Afghanistan Aftershocks”**

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FEATURING  
**Susan B. Glasser**  
*Staff Writer, The New Yorker*

CSIS EXPERTS  
**Seth G. Jones**  
*Senior Vice President; Harold Brown Chair; and Director, International Security Program, CSIS*

**Marti Flacks**  
*Director and Senior Fellow, Human Rights Initiative, CSIS*

**Michael J. Green**  
*Senior Vice President for Asia and Japan Chair, CSIS*

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Seth G. Jones Welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I have the honor of introducing our moderator today on the discussion on Afghanistan. She's Susan Glasser, the staff writer for The New Yorker, where she writes a weekly column on life in Washington. She has served as the top editor of several Washington publications, and has several fantastic books that I have read, including "Kremlin Rising," and "The Man Who Ran Washington." Susan, thanks for joining us.

Susan B. Glasser Oh, well, thank you so much, Seth. And thank you to everybody. This program today is titled, I think appropriately, "Afghan Aftershocks," although in some ways we're – I'm not quite sure aftershocks really captures fully the moment that we're in, which is still the shocks as well as the aftershocks. But thank you so much. This is a, I think, pretty urgent convening. And I can't think of three better people to have with us today to talk about what is unfolding right now inside Afghanistan, what it means for geopolitics, what it means for U.S. foreign policy, and for the Biden administration. So thank you so much to CSIS and to everybody for having us today.

And I'm going to go ahead and start with Seth, and introduce him, because he's very nice to mention my books but the truth is much of what I learned about Afghanistan I learned from Seth and his incredible works, both as an author and as a scholar. He is right now, of course, a senior vice president here at CSIS, and director of the International Security Program, and the Transnational Threats Project at CSIS. But to me, he is – for the purposes of this conversation, the author of many works, including what I highly recommend you go back and look at if you haven't before, "In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan," which was a book that came out 2009, is that right, Seth? Wow. And we've been at this a long time. I'm sure, like everybody else in this conversation, I'm really feeling my age this week. Twenty years since 9/11. Twenty years since the U.S. presence in Afghanistan began in this latest incarnation. But having that historical perspective is invaluable. So thank you, Seth.

The next panelist that we have is also a good friend of mine, Mike Green, who is also a senior vice president at CSIS. He is the senior vice president for Asia and Japan chair at CSIS. And while we're plugging books I must say, although it's not a book about Afghanistan, you would do very wisely to get Mike's book right away, if you haven't already, "By More Than Providence," which is about grand strategy and American power in the Asian-Pacific since 1783. But really, it is – it is a terrific book. And just as much to the point, it's actually a great read too, which is not always a given. And Mike is going to help us think about these events that are unfolding right now in kind of a broader context. So thank you so much, Mike, for joining us as well.

And our other panelist is someone I'm particularly delighted to have, because I think to bring the focus really squarely in the question of human rights and

what this means for the actual people who are being affected by this, as well as for American foreign policy at a time when the president has talked about reinjecting human rights as a pillar of American foreign policy, and yet finds that challenged almost from the get-go by the events that are unfolding here, so I'm delighted to have Marti Flacks as our other panelist today. She recently joined CSIS as a senior fellow and director of the Human Rights Initiative, which is incredibly timely. And I'm sure this is a quick immersion project in this, and has spent really the last, I guess it's decade, inside the government in roles that are directly relevant to our conversation today, both at the NSC and the State Department. So thank you so much, Marti, for joining us as well.

Are we here? Is she here? I can't – oh, OK. I can't see for some reason, so forgive me for asking that question.

Let's just jump right in, you know, recognizing that this is a fast-moving subject and that events could well be updated even while we're in the course of having this conversation. Seth, I do want to start with you and what it must be like for you as a historian to see, you know, us barraged not only with the events in Afghanistan as they're unfolding, but also barraged with the historical comparisons. Is this analogous to the fall of Saigon? Is it actually worse for American foreign policy than the fall of Saigon?

Is it like the fall of Kabul when the Taliban took Kabul in the first place? Is it resonant of superpowers before who have been humbled in Afghanistan, like the Soviet Union, like the British empire in 19th century? And we all have seen, you know, probably a million times that image of the famous painting of the lone soldier who managed to make it out of Afghanistan after one of the ill-fated British incursions.

So are we, you know, suffering, like, a thousand cuts of historical analogy? Should we just give up? Or is there actually some relevance to history here as we contemplate these events of the last couple of weeks?

Dr. Jones

Well, I think there are a lot of differences between Afghanistan today and some of the recent examples that people have talked about, including the fall of Saigon on the Vietnam side, or even Afghanistan, the British or Soviet experiences.

But what I would say on Afghanistan is historically – and this is true today, and this may get into some of the comments that Mike makes – that Afghanistan itself is a bit at the mercy of a range of other powers in the region and more globally that have used it for their own purposes. So obviously during the Cold War this was a struggle between the Soviet Union and the U.S. The Soviets invaded in 1979, and the U.S. then started a campaign to bleed them out, which they did by the end of the 1980s.

What we have now is a U.S. withdrawal. And we've seen notable activity from the – both the Chinese and the Russian embassies in Kabul, as well as the

Iranians, I mean, obviously in addition to Pakistan as well. So – and I think that’s true. Even if you go back to the British periods, Afghanistan was a bit of a struggle between the British and the Russians back during the British imperial period.

So I think what’s important in this context as well is that there are bigger issues than just Afghanistan. There are great-power issues at stake in Afghanistan, not just today during the negotiations, but going forward.

Ms. Glasser Well, you know, that was very artfully said. But I’m going to, like, press you on the question a little bit of, you know, the – how to process the images that we have been seeing over the last couple of weeks. You know, is this actually the sort of biggest black eye for American foreign policy since the fall of Saigon?

Dr. Jones I think there are a couple of black eyes between Saigon and today. I think the U.S. invasion of Iraq was a bit of a black eye with the insurgency that followed, that sucked a large number of U.S. forces there. But I think this is right at the top. And I think it’s not just that – the way the U.S. did this, the unraveling of human and women rights in Afghanistan. What’s clear is a lack of planning of how to actually leave.

But just at the same time where U.S. policymakers have said, you know, we don’t need to be in Afghanistan in part because the terrorism threat is minimal right now, at the same time we have the national security adviser coming on television over the last several days saying the threat from the Islamic State is grave right now. We also have U.N. reports out recently saying that the Taliban-al-Qaida relationship is probably stronger now than it’s ever been because of the victory in Afghanistan. So, I think, in that sense, you know, it’s been a real difficult ride for both the administration and for the U.S. more broadly. And in addition, now, we’ve had a lot more Russian and Chinese activity because they are providing insights and dialogue and diplomatic intelligence and military support to the Taliban right now.

Ms. Glasser Yeah, so I want to bring you in, Mike, on that very question of what we’ve heard from President Biden in recent days is this idea that somehow part of the reason he made the decision to leave Afghanistan is in part because he wants to refocus American policy on the growing concerns around China and the notion that great-power competition really essentially overrides a problem from two decades. And I’m curious what you think about that. He has made – repeatedly made this case, including just yesterday again in his remarks. The president has said well, China, you know, would love nothing more, and Russia, for us to be still pinned down and bothered by Afghanistan. What do you make of that particular argument? Because I think it’s at the heart of what he sees as what he’s doing here.

Michael J. Green I think that this notion that we can sort of turn off one theater of the world completely to have more success in another theater that we think is more

important is just – has always been wrong. We're a global power. And I do think it's worth emphasizing at the outset – and it's important for allies in Asia to know that what's happening right now does not represent a sort of broader American retreat from the world. I mean, going into this, in some polls two-thirds supported getting out of Afghanistan but, in the same polls, half to two-thirds supported defending Korea, defending Taiwan and Japan and Australia. Support and commitment to Asian partners is quite strong, but it was misguided to think that just completely pulling the plug on Afghanistan would make that competition problem with China easier.

There are a number of ways it's going to make it harder. I mean, the most obvious one we just talked about, which is the black eye and whatever this does to Biden's political standing. It's hard to execute grand strategy when you're falling in the polls, and he is right now. And the other things I think they probably didn't think through sufficiently. An al-Qaida – excuse me – a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan significantly complicates India's security situation; it draws them away from the Indo-Pacific. The last time the Taliban ran Afghanistan, it was very bad for India. Lashkar-e-Taiba and other terrorist groups went right at the Indians. So it messes up the Quad and the Indo-Pacific strategy. We know from Syria and Iraq when ISIS took over that foreign fighters used that safe haven to then go after our friends and allies in Southeast Asia against Australia. So the terrorism spillover effect is really worrying for our friends and allies. And this really complicates the president's democracy agenda. The Chinese are chortling. They are – I mean, I spent part of my grad school studying North Korean propaganda, and the way the Chinese government organs are talking about this right now sounds like North Korea; they are just chortling.

If you step back, Russia, China, Iran have some shared interest with us in stability in Afghanistan, but that's not what's happening. I think for the near future it's going to be filling the vacuum we've created and, as much as possible, damaging our standing, our credibility, so lots of spillover effects from this, ironically from an administration that wanted to do it in part to have more focus on the Indo-Pacific.

Ms. Glasser

So, Marti, I want to bring you into this, and I want to ask because it seems like, in a way, both Mike and, to a certain extent, Seth are taking issue with Biden's actual decision to withdraw, in addition to the manner in which the evacuation has been done. Other critics, you know, have tried to make a distinction between, you know, the question of whether to maintain a U.S. military presence after 20 years in Afghanistan, versus sort of what's transpired since April and since that Biden decision. I'd love to get your perspective on this. You know, do you think there's a basis for Biden's decision even if the execution itself has been so flawed, or were we destined, as I lot of people think – you know, was it basically destined to be a kind of chaotic mess that actually is very consistent with the wrong policy decision?

Marti Flacks

Yeah, I think – I think there is an important distinction to be made here between the decision to withdraw and the execution of that withdrawal. I think, you know, the idea that we can retroactively or retrospectively decide that this withdrawal was going to be as chaotic as it – as it was, is the wrong approach, or wrong analysis. I think even if the assumption is that the Taliban would potentially eventually take over, there's ways of going about that withdrawal that are less threatening to obviously the situation in terms of human rights in Afghanistan, but also our global standing on issues around human rights and democracy.

I don't think our allies and partners who are supporting democracy and human rights around the world expect the U.S. to indefinitely be a military presence in Afghanistan. And I don't think that that – the withdrawal itself is what is going to cause concern in terms of human rights and democracy for the Biden administration's agenda. The issue is how we went about it. And I can – I am sure that our allies, and civil society groups, and activists around the world are watching very closely what happens over the next few weeks in terms of how much we – the effort that we make to protect those who fought for these issues on the ground, both with our direct support and those who are sort of aligned with our values and our objectives.

And we've, obviously, dug ourselves into a very deep hole in terms of how this – how this withdrawal has started. We have time now to do it, to finish a little bit better than we started in terms of really making the effort to evacuate, to rescue those who directly supported the U.S. government, not just the military contractors and interpreters who are so important and deserve to be evacuated, but also those civil society organizations and individuals who are fighting for human rights, and democracy, and anti-corruption, and whose lives are directly in jeopardy right now because of that activism. If we can demonstrate the effort to make that – to protect those groups in the short term, and in the long term really demonstrate a continued amount of attention and a strategy in terms of engaging the Taliban on human rights issues, I think that we have a chance to regain a little bit of the credibility that we're at risk at losing globally on democracy and human rights.

Ms. Glasser

Well, can I follow up on this? Because I actually – I really – I think it's the most urgent question in a lot of ways, because one way or the other it appears that this evacuation is going to be ending very soon. Do you have any other insight or actual information? Because I feel like I don't have. I've heard the concern, frankly, for those Afghan allies, the kind of civil society people you're talking about, women and girls, I've heard that disappear from Biden's rhetoric in the last few days in a way that makes me very concerned. The reports from airport also suggest that, you know, they made some kind of a triage decision at some point to basically prioritize – understandably in many ways – American citizens or green card holders, or people who already had been approved for visas.

And so what information can you give us about whether they actually are even trying to rescue, you know, leaders of the, you know, civil society and human rights community for Afghan women and girls? And what's going to happen to them, even if they do get out? You know, this country has not been very welcoming in the last few years to people like that. So do you – can you tell us – (laughs) – what's going to happen to these people?

Ms. Flacks

I wish I had better news or more information, but I agree with your assessment. We really have seen that narrative about that broader group of Afghans that we need to support disappear. And, you know, with the announcement yesterday from the Taliban that they will stop people from getting to the airport, and sort of that changes the dynamic around how we get people out. And I think there's a real risk that what we start to see in the next few days is a false sense of stability, particularly in and around the airport, that it looks like no one else is coming therefore we've gotten everyone out who needs to get out, and we've done our job, when actually what's happening on the ground is that no one else can actually get there.

And the concern is, obviously, as soon as we're wheels up from the airport that gives the Taliban free rein to go after the people. We already know they're going door to door making lists of and looking online in terms of their relationships and their activism. So we know that these groups are really at high risk. And, you know, there's a lot of interest in the United States. I think from Congress we saw a letter from 46 senators calling on the United States to make it easier for those individuals to come, to implement some kind of humanitarian parole program for women's rights activists and human rights activists. But the challenge is going to be physically getting them out.

And I think that's where, you know, in the next few days, as the administration makes its decision about exactly how long this airlift operation is going to go, they need to turn their attention to – it can't be once we're wheels up, no one ever leaves Afghanistan again. There's got to be some kind of agreement that people who need to leave are able to get out – whether that's air corridors, whether that's humanitarian land corridors. But we can't simply pack up and assume that everybody who needs protection has gotten out when we just know that's not going to be the case.

Ms. Glasser

Yeah.

I want to go back to the bigger picture, but one more question for Marti because I do feel like sometimes the urgency of the moment in some of these conversations gets lost as we immediately go to big picture analysis. So, for once, I'm going to stick with the moment for just a second.

You have spent a lot of time inside, you know, our institutions of foreign policy in the last few years – the NSC, the State Department. Is this also a story about the lack of capacity, organizational and otherwise, of our institutions? I mean, you know, obviously, we have seen there's a lot of

tension between the Defense Department and State Department. We all know that some of that is eternal. It's certainly exacerbated in a crisis situation like this. But I got to wonder. It seems right now to me from a distance that the Pentagon, you know, they have incredible resources, and we tell them to mount the largest evacuation in human history, and they can do it and they can get these gigantic aircraft. And I have personally spoken with senior military officials who essentially have said to me, like, you know, I want to put bodies on planes, I don't care, you know, why can't we get the State Department to, you know, give me a piece of paper that lets these people on the planes? Because I'm happy to put them on my planes. What does this tell us about the capacity issues? You know, is that maybe what it is, as opposed to like, you know, the national security adviser screwing up? I mean –

Ms. Flacks

I think there are capacity challenges and logistical challenges. You know, nobody has a master list out there of every person who has supported a U.S. government democracy and human rights program, or frankly military program, that therefore needs to be evacuated, right? This is information that has to be culled from dozens or hundreds of sources, or people need to come forward themselves or get their employer to come forward and identify them. That's hard enough in the moments that are not crisis in a place like Afghanistan. But asking people to do that at a time where they're literally simultaneously burning their employment records, deleting their social media profiles, doing everything they can to stay undercover, asking them to then stick their heads up above the surface and identify themselves to come be collected is very difficult. And so the State Department has a very tough job of literally trying to track these people down, on top of trying to track down obviously a large number of American citizens who also need to be evacuated and who are spread out around the country. So I think it is a capacity challenge. It's obviously exacerbated by the fact that this wasn't planned in advance, that this has to be an emergency response, that they had to stand up this capacity in a matter of days and not a matter of months.

The other thing that I'm, you know, concerned about obviously in terms of capacity is the fact that none of this visa processing was happening beforehand, right? If the 20,000 SIV applicants who had already started the process before this crisis had actually been fully processed and evacuated, that's 20,000 more people we could have put on a plane yesterday. And if we had encouraged people to move that bureaucracy along and actually get more of those folks who we knew we were going to pull out processed earlier, then we would have had a lot more capacity to do that now. And that also has to do with capacity at places like DHS as well as the State Department, where they've been really been strained by the border and other things.

Ms. Glasser

Yeah, I think this is just such an important point. You know, never fail to look for a simple explanation in some ways.

But, Seth, a lot of what people do in a situation like this – right? – is they just – they don't have a lot of context, or you know, it's such a partisan moment in

the U.S. But you've watched it over 20 years. And it used to be said – I think quite correctly – that, you know, the military didn't fight a 20-year war in Afghanistan. It fought 20 one-year wars, because the nature of how the American military was bringing people in and out and also the lack of a long-term vision or strategy. What were some of the things, you know, the sort of misconceptions about Afghanistan that, in your view, you know, have plagued this conversation? There must be things that just annoy the heck out of you that you could never, you know, purge out of the conversation and now are coming altogether to, you know, this terrible ending.

Dr. Jones

Yeah, I mean, there are a couple. One issue is people continue to come back to the cost of the war in Afghanistan and continue to cite these huge numbers. And you know, there certainly were periods – I was in Afghanistan during the surge. I was in the Department of Defense – in uniform, actually, as a civilian – but was there during the surge. We had over a hundred thousand forces there. But I think the reality that people have to remember is that by 2021 we were down to 2,500 and were probably going to go lower than that if we were going to stay. We had small number of aircraft, fixed-wing aircraft, on the ground. You could supplement that also with aircraft coming from the Persian Gulf or from maritime assets in the Indian Ocean. But the amounts of money – and no American soldier, frankly, had been killed in 18 months.

So, I mean, I would also highlight that when people talk about the costs either in blood or in treasure, you're lumping in 20 years together, not looking at that in one-year increments. So I think part of the question is also what were we now down to by 2021? And was that something that we should have thought about continuing, at least for the next couple of years?

The other thing along these lines that has been a problem from the beginning – and just to, again, put this one out on the table – is, you know, the Taliban itself. People have asked, how can the U.S. lose to the Taliban, you know, after 20 years of war? This war did not happen in a vacuum. The Taliban's command-and-control structure has been in Pakistan. And there has been from the beginning, because there were elements of Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI, helicoptering Taliban officials out back in 2021. So there's been state support.

We know from leaked intelligence last year, in 2020, that there are elements of Russia's GRU, the military intelligence unit, providing assistance. That actually had gone back several years. The Iranians, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, had also not just been providing assistance, but it also allowed for one of the Taliban's major regional shuras to sit on the Iranian side of the border.

So the Taliban was not exactly operating in a vacuum. They had support from several governments in the region on the clandestine side. And so I think that's the picture Americans need to understand. It's not that the U.S. was defeated by a, you know, lowly insurgent extremist organization.

And then the third thing I'd highlight very briefly is I've heard a lot of people hope – and I use that word purposely – that the Taliban today is markedly different from the Taliban of the 1990s. I mean, I have spent a lot of time looking at this organization, including on the ground. The Taliban is different in some ways. It's a lot more technologically savvy. The Taliban of the 1990s did not use the internet. They didn't use – they are now heavily involved in using digital platforms for propaganda, recruitment, fundraising, all of that kind of activity.

But at their core, they are still an extremist organization. Their view of women and the role of women in society is like 8th century right now. There are, you know, concerns about multinational corporations operating in Afghanistan. People are going to be very nervous about the legal structure of operating in a country like Afghanistan when your court system is run by religious leaders, the Taliban courts. So I think in that sense people need to understand that while there are some changes, the Taliban is – at its core it's a very extremist organization. The ideology is deeply rooted in the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. And you can't paper that over.

Ms. Glasser

You know, I'm so glad you brought that up. I noticed that everyone's heads was nodding as you made this point about the Taliban. I can't count the number of, you know, stories – frankly, irresponsible ones – I've seen in recent days. You know, my guide – rule of thumb that I've been saying to people is, like, if you see a story that, you know, the lead or the headline is today's Taliban, like, you know, kinder, gentler reform, you can skip that story because it's not going to be accurate.

And the other point I thought, Seth, that's really important here that you just made is using the word Pakistan. I'm amazed at how many conversations about what's unfolding right now don't include the role of Pakistan in, you know, developing, fostering the Taliban throughout its history, including in this most recent turn to take over the country once again.

Mike, what is your view of, A, the role of the region, you know, regional bad actors such as Pakistan, Russia, and Iran, in kind of fueling this crisis? And then I also wanted to ask you about the allies and why we've seen some of them, some of the European allies – in particular I think in the U.K., Germany as well – way more critical publicly of the Biden administration than anything we've seen up until this point. They seem to be really, really betrayed and, again, by a president who came into office saying, you know, America is back. After four years of Donald Trump, we're going to listen to you again. And then they didn't listen. So what's going on with that?

Dr. Green

So let me just focus in on Pakistan, because I think that is probably the most important variable we need to watch. You know, 200 million people, significant nuclear weapons capability. Pakistan is much more complicated than the headlines are letting on as well. I had East and South Asia under my

area of responsibility and made multiple trips to Pakistan. Pakistan is both an enabler of the Taliban and extremism, and a victim at the same time. And what worries me, among many things, in terms of the geopolitical fallout from this, is that those within Pakistan's national security establishment, particularly within the ISI, the intelligence directorate, who support the Taliban, sympathize, are going to be empowered within a Pakistani political context.

And we're going to find, I fear, that the victory of the Taliban pushes Pakistan in a different strategic direction, one that's even potentially more problematic for us. And I've heard people say: Now we can disengage from Pakistan and just cut them off, because we don't need them. I think it's quite the opposite. Pakistan is a much – with nuclear weapons – a much, much bigger problem we are now going to have to pay much more attention to. We are going both have to be tougher and engage more at the same time. It's going to be a subtle and very difficult game for us.

In terms of the allies, having, you know, been in the Pentagon and then almost five years in the NSC, often you will find that these kinds of plans are shared among Five Eyes or in very small, close, sensitive circles. And a lot of the people – a lot of the political figures in Europe in particular you hear criticizing the U.S. right now probably were not cleared to hear what their intelligence services or their militaries were hearing from the U.S. I do not think that we just completely surprised our closest allies on this.

That said, from Asian allies, including very, very close ones, I hear at senior levels – and they don't talk about it publicly because, frankly, they're on the front lines with China. They don't want to add to any doubt about American commitment. The Chinese, you know, are saying: You can't rely on the Americans. They're horrible. They attack countries. They're hypocrites. They're dangerous. And also, they're very weak and unreliable. They're throwing everything but the kitchen sink at us. But our allies in the front line in the competition with China wisely are not doing what some of the French, Germans are doing, and sort of casting further doubt on the United States.

But privately, pretty consistently, even those who were, you know, read into the most sensitive, you know, security planning, privately they are frustrated at the lack of consultation. And this was a decision that was made, I think, primarily for political reasons, on our side. You know, why not wait for the winter, when – why do it in the height of the fighting season, for example? Why pull out of Bagram, which we needed? Why pull out the enablers, the technical assistance, and the contractors now? There are a lot of sort of operational questions where I think that allies were not fully consulted and had different views.

And, you know, the administration can recover. Our allies need us. I don't think they're going anywhere. But, you know, it did raise some questions about what was supposed to be the dream team. And we know them. They

are in many ways incredibly talented. But this is – this is going to leave a black eye, I'm afraid.

Ms. Glasser

Well, and this actually leads to the question I want to actually ask everybody – but let's start with you, Marti – which is the question: What have we learned actually about President Biden and his foreign policy as a result of, you know, observing closely this first major foreign policy crisis of his administration? I mean, you know, to me one of the things I feel like I've learned is, you know, just how painful the contradiction is between the aspirations embodied in not just being a president who says, you know, I'm going to recommit to America's alliances, but also going to recommit to the idea of democracy and human rights as being a pillar of our foreign policy.

That seems ever more in contradiction or, you know, not necessarily reconcilable with Biden's other goals of – you know, he's embraced this “end the forever war” rhetoric. He's embraced the idea and the fact of nation-building at home as being, understandably in some ways, the pillar of what he has to do as president. So what have you learned about his foreign policy from this crisis?

Ms. Flacks

Yeah. It's a great question. And I think—I think it's too early to say, in a way. And what I mean by that is I think Afghanistan has always been, for President Biden, a special case. And it feels very much like something that he has personal, very strong, long-held opinions about, that were not going to change, perhaps regardless of the circumstances on the ground. We know that he has been arguing for a withdrawal from Afghanistan for – you know, going back to the beginning of the Obama administration.

So you know, there's a sense to which this is a unique situation, and maybe one that is not replicable in terms of how he thinks about democracy and human rights on the global stage, for example. That's sort of the optimistic take in terms of a democracy and human rights agenda. If that's the case, if that's going to be the message that: Look, we just had – you know, we just had to make this decision for Afghanistan. We didn't go about it the right way. We, obviously, operationally and in terms of implementation, failed. But maybe it was the right strategic decision from our administration's point of view – which is what I'd like them to say at some point. Then they really have some work to do to rebuild that global human rights and democracy agenda, right?

And they can do that – you know, going back to your question about capacity – we have a lot of unfilled positions, including at places like the State Department. So we don't have confirmed assistant secretaries for democracy, human rights, and labor. But we don't even have appointees yet for things like the ambassadors at large for trafficking persons, or global women's issues, or war crimes issues. So we can really see the administration put a greater effort into staffing up the people that would lead an agenda like this and help them actually roll out what we haven't seen yet, which is the global human rights agenda. What is that approach?

You know, Afghanistan aside – or, maybe acknowledging what went wrong in Afghanistan – what does that mean for the administration’s human rights agenda in other places? And how can we reassure the groups and allies that we’re working with around the world that we are going to take this issue more seriously? He has a huge opportunity to do that in December at the democracy summit which, you know, is supposed to have human rights as one of its centerpieces.

But I think there’s a long way to go to really roll out a robust agenda that makes that not a talk shop. Not just a summit of heads of states, of people in violent agreement on the principles of democracy and human rights, but actual concrete commitments by the United States and their allies to support existing and fragile democracies, to shore them up against external influencers like Russia and China, who undermine them. But also, to respond in these egregious situations like Afghanistan will be, no doubt, by September, to continue to shine a light on those situations and not just walk away, wash our hands of it, and say, you know, it’s a place that we can’t fix. So I think there’s a lot of work to do between now and then to get back to that place.

Dr. Green

Susan, can I briefly jump in on the democracy summit? Because I think it’s really going to be complicated now. You know, President Biden’s, you know, hyper realpolitik justification of the withdrawal, at least initially – and it’s still in his tone – undercuts the other Joe Biden the world heard, which I think was sincere about the importance of democracy. And he got into the race in 2020 because of what happened in Charlottesville and concerns about democracy. And I believe it’s sincere for him. And those two Joe Bidens have to talk and work this out.

And going into the democracy summit the way the administration has been heading towards it will be a disaster, because it has largely been a transatlantic Western democracy planning process. And I think what the administration has to do now is listen, as Marti said very well, acknowledge flaws in our democracy, acknowledge mistakes, and get some Indonesian leaders, get some leaders from Africa to play a prominent role. Because coming after what we’re seeing in Afghanistan, if it is just sort of a G-7 democracy summit, it’s going to – it’s going to backfire, for something that I personally think the president does take very seriously.

Ms. Glasser

Yeah, that’s a – that’s an excellent point.

So, Seth, I want to ask you this question. What have you learned about President Biden and his foreign policy from this crisis?

Dr. Jones

Well, I mean, I’ve learned a couple of things. One is – and probably most important – is the president ran on a commitment to end the U.S. involvement in forever wars. And we saw the last two presidents – Trump

and Obama – struggle to pull out of the Middle East in particular. So Biden is now pulling his forces, U.S. forces, out of Afghanistan, out of South Asia. The Department of Defense is working on its posture review right now. I would fully expect them to continue to take this issue seriously. I think we're going to see a decline in the U.S. presence in the Middle East. We've already seen it in Africa. And the shift is going to be, I think, a focus on Asia in particular. I think there are still some concerns about the Russians, but a big focus on the Indo-Pacific area.

And so I – you know, if we look at Trump's struggles with this, he had initially, essentially, been guided by individuals like his chairman of the Joint Chiefs, his National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, which had had him revisit the wisdom of withdrawing. Biden is not doing that. Remember, Trump had talked about withdrawing forces from Syria and then kept them there. We still have U.S. forces in Syria. I take Biden to be much more serious when he says he's going to pull forces out essentially come hell or high water, and so I think that's one thing.

The second issue – which, you know, again, organizations are going to get a vote in this – at the same time that President Biden noted that our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains what it has always been, he said, which is preventing a terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland, well, the terrorism picture, as President Biden's own intelligence community has said, is likely to get a lot worse very quickly in that country. There are already around 10,000 foreign fighters. The prisons were emptied by the Taliban, including some very senior al-Qaida leaders – by our count several thousand, down to the foot-soldier level. So you've increased by as many as 50 percent the number of foreign fighters in the country. And you've got concerns about Islamic State warning.

So there are going to be issues on what President Biden has said – this gets to the second point – this use of over-the-horizon capabilities to hit terrorists. Is that going to be feasible without an ally on the ground, without bases either in country – we've got no bases in Afghanistan, or won't shortly; don't have any in the region at this point, not in Central Asia, not in Pakistan – can you actually effectively conduct a campaign the way the president has advocated using over-the-horizon – like flying them from Al Udeid. These are MQ-9 drones. It's a 12-hour roundtrip flight, which gives them only about six hours of loitering time. Can you really do that without all the pieces, including the intelligence infrastructure, on the ground? It will put this to the test.

Ms. Glasser

Yeah. These are such important points, I think.

And I was struck, as well, you made the point about counterterrorism bases. Back in April, when President Biden announced the decision to withdraw, they said that they would use the time between April and then to negotiate new agreements in order to have counterterrorism bases. And as far as I'm

aware, they have not succeeded in doing so with a single country. Is that – is that right?

Dr. Jones I understand there have – there have been negotiations, and I suspect they'll continue, with some Central Asian governments. The Russians are going to get at least – if not a vote on this one, they're going to have a lot of influence in whether this happens, particularly if you have U.S. strike platforms being positioned in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan or one of the Stans and they're being flown in to conduct strikes. Any MQ-9 platform, for example, can also collect intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. And with Russian GRU forces on the ground you better believe the Russians are going to be nervous about having platforms that can collect intelligence stationed in Central Asia. So this'll be an interesting negotiation.

But at the moment, the U.S. has basically two big options: The Persian Gulf, which is a long way away and requires overflight rights to be negotiated with countries like Pakistan; or using maritime platforms in the Indian Ocean. Neither of them, frankly, are ideal. I mean, it's like we've cut out knees off on this one.

Mr. Glasser Yeah. I think this is a very important point, and I suspect it's going to get a lot more attention as we get closer and closer to that anniversary of 9/11 and people start to think about the aftershocks and get out of the immediate evacuation stage.

But, Mike, let me just stick with our original question here and get your thought on what you've learned about Biden and his foreign policy from all this.

Dr. Green Well, I think, as experienced and strategic as a lot of them are, they're a little bit like when I was coaching my kid's soccer game – they all went after the ball, and the ball was strategic competition with China. But I think a little more careful thought would have led them to realize that of Seth's two options, the maritime option, who are we talking about when we're talking about dealing with terrorism from the Indian Ocean? We're talking about the Seventh Fleet, homeported in Yokosuka, Japan. They're supposed to be defending our allies in East Asia. So that's a little bit of a problem, I think, that could have been anticipated.

I'm also struck how much Donald Trump's shadow hangs over the Biden administration. You know, the president and his advisors kept saying, look, Donald Trump cut this deal. You know, why were they trapped by that? Maybe to some extent because they're worried about the Taliban punishing us for breaking the deal, but I think a lot of it was domestic American politics. And so the shadow of Donald Trump is still there.

You can see it in trade policy. If the administration wants to kind of do something big in Asia to compensate for this, the obvious move is get into the

CPTPP, do a big trade deal, which a lot of the senior people in this administration privately agree with. But the politics of trade because of Donald Trump, in Michigan/Ohio, are too complicated. So just the Trump shadow is still there.

And then I – and Seth will have views on this – but I’m a little worried about civil-military relations. I think when people do the forensics and people like you, Susan, and figure out what happened, I think we’re going to find that the Joint Staff recommended that we keep a footprint, and they were told no. You know, I think we’ll find they were a little passive aggressive, and the planning didn’t go well. And then when there was a go in and get us out of this, they did what the U.S. military can do like no other in history, they did it, historically massive airlift. But I suspect that when we unwind and learn about the process and all of this, it’s going to raise some questions about civil-military relations in terms of how we do grand strategy on problems like this.

Ms. Glasser

You know, you’re being diplomatic, I would say, in how you’re framing that. I mean, this has been a suspicion of mind, absolutely not based on reporting as well. But one of my theories in recent days absolutely has been to wonder, you know, since I think it is credible and accurate to say that the Pentagon did not recommend that Biden withdraw back in April, I have wondered, you know, what was the level of planning and ownership that anybody took over this decision. And I would actually expand that possibly to include the NSC. You know, I imagine that many of even Biden’s civilian advisors, this was not a decision that they might have taken in exactly the same way. And so this – again, this question of ownership.

But, Seth, do you agree with our theory?

Dr. Jones

Yes – yes, I want to weigh in on this. Two quick points on this. One is my understanding is that senior U.S. military leaders did not support a withdrawal – a full withdrawal from Afghanistan, at least not along the timelines that it has occurred in 2021. And we’re actually quite concerned, based in part on U.S. intelligence estimates, that if we did that, that there would be a collapse of the government and there would be then – within that vacuum created there would be a number of groups, including the ones that Mike has mentioned which, you know, some of the anti-Indian groups – Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed – in addition to the Islamic State and al-Qaida would move into that vacuum.

The second issue is, having talked to a range of people involved in the withdrawal, the military actually did a very good job, methodical, of withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan – so, you know, destroying equipment, in some cases giving it or selling it, mostly giving it to the Afghans or others, bringing it back to the United States. What the military – I don’t know if this – they weren’t directed to do this or where the problem was, but there appeared to be little planning, at least near-term planning on the logistics of getting people out of Afghanistan, whether they were U.S. citizens,

whether they were individuals, including interpreters who had worked with the U.S. military or with diplomats or with development agencies. So all the logistical elements, it's not – maybe in the end they were going to do it. They thought they had more time. And a lot of – maybe they weren't directed by the NSC to do that. So there's – but there was – there was – my assessment, pretty good planning and execution in the withdrawal, just not in everything else that happened.

Ms. Glasser You know, Marti, I want to ask you about this as well, because, you know, Mike's term "civil-military relations," really in some ways it's about these questions that we saw a lot in the Trump years. What do you do as a bureaucracy, as a – you know, as a senior official when the president makes an order that you don't agree with or – you know, I mean, there's a million ways to slow roll things, and they didn't begin and end with Donald Trump in Washington. Is that a little bit of what we're seeing here as well?

Ms. Flacks I think it's a great question. I would – I would like to believe obviously that if folks had anticipated this outcome, they would have approached this differently, right? I don't think this is an outcome that anyone in the U.S. government wanted to see happen. But I can certainly understand how that could have unfolded, you know, exactly as Seth and Mike said.

I just want to project that problem, though, forward from here to say, you know, we're now in a situation where we've created a disastrous exit. Maybe we can salvage a bit of it by getting a large number of people out; you know, knock on wood, everybody comes out safely. But in a sense, that's the easy part, right. That is, as these guys said, the U.S. military doing what it does best and logistically moving people out.

The harder part of the foreign-policy problem in Afghanistan and the region is after we're gone, right. Then it's the problems that Seth is describing around counterterrorism. It's the geopolitical issues. And it's the human-rights challenge of how you exercise maximum leverage over the Taliban to try and preserve what space we can for human rights, for women's rights, for economic development. And we've got a U.S. government that is both literally exhausted and will be from just, you know, weeks and months of this effort. But also who wants to be left holding the Afghanistan bag after all this, right? It's an incredibly difficult problem, and no one's going to want to take ownership of it.

And so I think it's going to be really important to keep pressing the administration to – that's going to want to naturally move on to the next big problem or the next disaster to keep the spotlight on the situation, particularly from a human-rights point of view, in terms of what the Taliban does next, because we do, I think, have leverage over the situation. Maybe it's limited. But, you know, human rights are not an on-off switch. It's a continuum. So we have leverage we can deploy, but it's going to require

constant attention and continued focus. And I fear that this administration is just not going to want to do that in the short term.

Ms. Glasser

Yeah. Just to follow up on that quickly, because I think that's a really important point. I have to say, listening, that's been one of the most hollow things I feel like I've heard in the last couple of weeks is this idea, like, we didn't expend our considerable leverage or power credibility, you know, to have a better, you know, ending when it comes to civil society and human rights on the ground.

And, you know when you hear the secretary of state, Tony Blinken, or President Biden saying in the last week, oh, well, but, you know, in the future the focus of our diplomacy is we're going to lecture the Taliban about women and girls. I mean, A, I find that hard to believe because, as you said, just as a matter of sheer politics, how is it – the president is not going to want to talk about Afghanistan going forward. His message to the American people is I've solved this problem by taking a tough decision that my predecessors, Democrat and Republican, were unwilling to make, and I've moved on because that's best for the country, right.

So the idea that he's going to expend any credibility – I mean, realistically speaking, you can't really be envisioning that, you know.

Ms. Flacks

I think it's going to be very tough. I think that's absolutely right. I think, you know, we have a limited window of kind of that continued pressure around, you know, withdrawal and recognition of this government as it forms and the financial strings that we're now pulling in terms of holding their central-bank reserves in New York and the IMF and World Bank suspending their aid; where we do have a moment of real leverage that, you know, we really, I think, have to push this administration to deploy as best we can.

And then the question is going to be, you know, how much civil society and activists on the ground are able to continue to get the message out around particularly the situation of women and girls if it does deteriorate, because I think that's something that can break through the noise and get this administration to continue to focus on this.

You know, and I do think, to the question earlier about, you know, has the Taliban changed, what are we going to see that's different from last time, I completely agree. Nothing fundamental has changed. The question is, you know, instrumentally have they gotten a little bit smarter about how they portray themselves, and therefore can we use that leverage, that need for recognition or for finances, to keep them on a little bit of a shorter leash? But I think it's going to be very difficult to get the administration to continue to focus on it without really tugging those heartstrings and really continuing to shine a spotlight on what's happening on the ground on an ongoing basis.

Ms. Glasser So I know we're coming close to the end, so I want to pull back. It is going to be soon the 20th anniversary of 9/11. And by all accounts it looks as though the U.S. really will be gone from the country by then. We'll have gotten out however many people will have gotten out by then, way more than seemed possible, I suppose, at the beginning of this kind of crazy couple of weeks. But, you know, even a hundred thousand obviously is nowhere near the estimates of the number of people who worked with or assisted the American military and its associated institutions over the last two decades.

What is it going to be like – I want to ask each of you – you know, when you – when you see the Taliban flag waving over Kabul, the American embassy not occupied in this place, you know, that this faraway place that no one ever expected the United States to be engaged with – and it's going to bring back so many memories for people of, you know, that terrible day in September of 2001 – you know, Seth, what do you – what's it going to be like? You know, and what impact will it have, this sort of almost national moment of failure to be recognized at that time?

Dr. Jones Well, I think for me – I mean, I – on 9/11, I saw the plane hit the Pentagon. So it was – I mean, this is a really – I mean, there is an emotional feel to 9/11 itself. But I have to say, if – you know, fast-forwarding 20 years after that, and seeing a Taliban running the government in Afghanistan, and noting that the Taliban's relationship with al-Qaida are not just strong, but according, again, to recent U.N. assessments, actually stronger because they've achieved victory now. And there have been – there's been a lot of interesting reporting of jihadist platforms across the globe in West Africa, North Africa, East Africa, and other areas of the Middle East saying: Look, folks, the place to go now is not Syria.

The Russians and the Syrian government, and even the Iranians for that matter, have taken care of most of the – you know, what was the emirate in Syria and on the Iraqi side of the border, with the exception of Idlib. Afghanistan is the place to be right now. And this is what is going across a range of these chatrooms. It feels like, boy, we haven't – we haven't moved that far. With all of the money that's been spent, with all the individuals that have served, with Americans that have died, it feels like an awfully familiar place to be in, September 11th, 2021.

Ms. Glasser It's fair to say that none of us would have exactly foreseen this moment 20 years ago. Mike, what do you think, to have the Taliban flag flying on 9/11?

Dr. Green So I was in the White House on 9/11. And so it's pretty emotional for me and my former colleagues too. I was an expert on Japan and Korea, and I found myself becoming an expert also on Pakistan and India and Afghanistan and Central Asia. I'll tell you the big difference from 20 years ago. When 9/11 happened, Americans didn't know Afghans personally. Going forward, there are going to be thousands of Americans who worked with NGOs, who worked – who were military, or diplomats, or USAID – thousands who have deep,

deep personal friendships with good and decent people who are going to be left behind and suffering.

So my sense is that politically it's going to be impossible to cauterize this wound for the administration. And to Marti's point earlier, and your point about ownership, you're going into this – you know, Washington insiders could say: Who owned the Indo-Pacific? Who owned climate change? Who owned democracy? You couldn't find who owned this issue. And if Marti's concerns are borne out, if nobody owns this, it's just going to get harder, because it is an interagency problem. And in a way, it's all society because of the way that NGOs and universities, like the ones where Seth and I teach, were so involved. And Seth's right. It's going to light up the counterterrorism map. And I do worry at some level we're going to have to go in and deal with this again. Maybe not, but that worries me.

But I will conclude on an optimistic note. Having written this 240-year history of American strategy in Asia, we do have – as Winston Churchill was reported to have said – you can count on the Americans to do everything wrong before they do it right. We do have pretty good strategic capacity to recover. Look at the criticism President Biden's getting even from Democrats. When authoritarian systems make mistakes like this, everybody tells the boss he's doing a great job. (Laughs.) So I am somewhat hopeful that our natural democratic feedback loop and the influence of our allies will get us to the place where Marti and Seth need – were we think we need to be to make this right.

Ms. Glasser            So, Marti, we've got literally one minute left, but – I know this is not normal for a Washington think-tank event, but you know, people, I think, are so moved by what has been happening and the human toll here. Do you have any advice for anyone who might be listening about what they can do to help and, you know, what you think would be the most important thing that can still be done to help Afghans in this crisis?

Ms. Flacks            Yeah, it's a great question. And I just want to echo what Mike just said. You know, I'm of the generation – I was a recent college grad on 9/11 and living here in D.C., and you know, had family downtown in New York City. And you know, a lot of people I know joined that military in the moment, and almost everyone I know in the Foreign Service in the State Department cycled through Afghanistan at one point or another. So my Facebook feed and social media is all people who are reaching out to their Afghan friends and former coworkers and trying to help get them out and trying to figure out how they can support them. And that's, you know, been one of the small sort of inspirational pieces of this, is that grassroots movement to really try and support Afghans who are in tough situations, and I think there's a lot that we can continue to do even after the U.S. pulls out.

There's going to be a tremendous number of Afghan refugees resettled here in the United States. Those organizations that resettle them are nonprofits.

They get some government money. They need a lot of private money if you can support them financially. If you can volunteer your time, these are people who are going to need a tremendous amount of help. And there will be aid organizations and others still trying to work on the ground in Afghanistan to try and get the word out about what's happening there. And the extent to which we can help and promote those organizations and share their information, we can keep this issue on the radar.

Ms. Glasser            Well, you guys have done a great job of just that in this conversation. I feel like I've got a lot better grounding in thinking about this in a clear-eyed way. So I want to thank you, Marti and Mike and Seth, and CSIS, for convening this conversation today, and all of you for listening to it. I have a feeling this is not the last word on, you know, the United States and Afghanistan. But thank you, again, to everyone for your time today.

Dr. Green              Thanks, Susan.

Dr. Jones              Thanks, Susan