Online Event

“The U.S. Legacy in Afghanistan: Past, Present, and Future”

DATE:
Thursday, July 8, 2021 at 1:00 p.m. EDT

FEATURING:
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Transcript By
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Seth G. Jones: Thanks for joining us and welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I am excited to have two outstanding experts with me. We’re here to discuss Afghanistan and related counterterrorism issues. The focus is on the past, the present, and the future of Afghanistan.

I have Carter Malkasian with me. He’s sitting to my left. And he’s the author of the new book that I’m holding up right now, “The American War in Afghanistan,” which is now available for purchase, including on Amazon. Congratulations, Carter.

Carter Malkasian: Thank you, Seth. Thank you very much.

Seth G. Jones: Carter – and you can take a look at his bio – is – in addition to being the author here, is the former special assistant for strategy to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joe Dunford, as well as has had extensive experience in Afghanistan among other warzones. And Carter, I think I’ve run into you in a range of places including in Asadabad, Kunar province. So good to see you in Washington now, not in one of those locations.

Carter Malkasian: Well, hopefully someday I’ll get a chance to go back to Asadabad.

Seth G. Jones: That’s right. Maybe the next time –

Carter Malkasian: Hopefully, you will too.

Seth G. Jones: – next time we can do this from somewhere in Afghanistan.

And then I’ve got Gina Bennett sitting to my right. She’s a senior analyst at the National Counterterrorism Center and has written extensively on counterterrorism. She’s had a 30-year career at the Central Intelligence Agency. She authored the 1993 report that warned of the growing danger of Osama bin Laden and the 2006 National Intelligence Estimate “Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the U.S.” Gina, thanks for joining us as well.

Gina Bennett: Oh, thank you for having me.

Seth G. Jones: So I’m going to start with the situation today in Afghanistan, and then I’m going to go to the past, and then we’ll end with the future. So we’re going to – we’re going to weave time into this.

Carter, let me start with you. There’s been a lot of speculation in the media and news reports, and frankly, at least in my – in my view, not a lot of good analysis about current Taliban advances in Badghis and Kunduz and other provinces. Details still remain a little murky, for example, about some of the
fighting in Badghis’ capital. Some reports have also suggested that the Taliban control roughly 150 of 400 district centers. But let me just turn to you. You’ve been looking at this for a long time. What is your assessment today of the Taliban’s strategy? What are they – what are they trying to do? And what’s your general sense of their strength right now?

Carter Malkasian: Thank you, Seth. Thank you for having me today.

As you know, like, better than I do, it’s always really hard to figure out what the Taliban are actually doing. And so I always say I don’t want to presume that I know more than I actually do because it’s always like trying to read tea leaves, and you can interpret a small piece of information to be much more than it actually is.

So I think that there’s probably – there’s two things that I’m thinking about as I look at the Taliban strategy right now. One is that their strategy is to try to capture Kabul and take over the whole country, and this is a phase of that. And so what we’re seeing right now is that they’re taking out the districts, and then they will move on to the cities and provincial capitals, and then Kabul itself in due course.

Now, there’s another strategy that they could be playing out here, and this is what Zabihullah Mujahid basically said today and he’s said a few times prior to that, which is that they’re not actually moving on the provincial capitals right now. They’re not moving on the cities right now. They’re taking out the countryside and now they’re then going to surround the provincial capitals – Mujahid has not said this part – surround the provincial capitals and pressure them such to get concessions from the government at the negotiating table. And those would probably be some very severe concessions that they would be after.

Now, this theory could also be seen in the fact the Taliban have said that they intend on announcing a plan soon for negotiations and put out their own plan for how the peace settlement’s going to go. So the military pressure they’re applying right now could be a means of creating leverage such that the government will do the things that they would want to see in whatever their peace plan’s going to be, but I would suspect that it would be things that the government in no way would want to do, like surrender power. But again, very hard to know what the exact strategy is going to be.

Seth G. Jones: So just a follow-up question for you, Carter, then: What is your sense about the status of the peace negotiations? For some, it’s been low probability of success anyway, prospects are largely dead now that the U.S. is withdrawing. You may have a different view, though.
Carter Malkasian: Well, I was someone who earlier was optimistic on the peace talks, but I fear that events have proven me wrong. It looks like the peace talks are pretty stalled right now. I don’t want to say that they’re dead because the two groups are meeting. The two groups are in Doha. They do have meetings from time to time. There were the meetings in Tehran that happened just yesterday and the day before that, out of which came a communique that said they’re both going to – they think that peace is the best way forward. But we’re not seeing major movement on the part of the Taliban; and the government, too, has been recalcitrant for some time.

I mean, it does look like that our withdrawal has reduced some of the impetus to negotiate. But for me, that was something that was naturally going to happen in the process of the withdrawal and that didn’t necessarily mean that we shouldn’t withdraw.

Seth G. Jones: Yeah.

So, Gina, let me turn to you on the terrorism picture. I think a lot of Americans probably are still wondering or at least curious about what the threat looks like today. Most people are probably aware that there has – there is at least a relatively small presence of al-Qaida, particularly al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, as well as a relatively small number of Islamic State Khorasan. What’s your sense about the threat to the U.S. or even the terrorism threat to the region right now?

Gina Bennett: No, it’s a very good question, and I do need to caveat that I am here providing my personal views, as you know, not representative of the government. So I have to just say that for the record.

But in general, I don’t think anyone is going to be surprised to know that any one of the terrorist groups and probably individuals and organizations that we haven’t even been able to name yet are going to continue to pose a terrorist threat. Terrorism is – just remains a very easy tactic, so we all know that.

But I think in terms of threat to the United States, the question is really more: What does the United States today consider a threat to it from al-Qaida, from ISIS, from any other group? After surviving 9/11 – we’re almost 20 years since that attack – facing, you know, mass shootings on a regular basis in this country and concerns about, you know, White supremacist terrorism and other types of terrorism in the United States, I’m not sure that the calculation for Americans is quite the same. I think that they should anticipate that al-Qaida, ISIS, these other groups have more reason now than ever to attack us. Revenge has always been the number-one motivation of terrorism. And so we have had a military footprint for 20 years in the Middle East. I don’t see
that their desire to attack us is going down. Whether or not they can in any
given timeframe is a different story, of course.

Seth G. Jones: Yeah. And we’ll come back, Gina, to your sense about to what degree the U.S.
period in Afghanistan – and Pakistan for that matter because the U.S.,
obviously, struck al-Qaida targets in Pakistan – was successful. So we’ll come
back to that a little bit later.

There have also been some concerns, just to ask a follow up, about some of
the anti-Indian groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba operating from Afghan territory.
In recent conversations I had with senior Indian officials, they were
definitely concerned particularly with continuing states of tension over
Jammu and Kashmir about Afghan territory being used by groups that would
target them. Is that – is that a concern – is that a concern, in your
perspective? It’s not – it’s not as much a U.S. concern, but certainly would be
a concern about regional instability.

Gina Bennett: Sure. I mean, it is. It should be. I mean, we’re going to go into a period of time
where Afghanistan becomes less predictable. We’re going to see more
instability. These are always the havens for that kind of activity. It’s a lot
easier to hide somewhere where there’s chaos already. So I think India and
other countries have every right to be concerned about that kind of activity. I
mean, to me it reminds me a lot of the Bekaa Valley in the 1970s.

So I think they should be concerned. They, I’m sure, are. You’re right; I don’t
know that it will raise much for us as much as it does for India. But I don’t –
to me, it’s just like the past is so much like the 1980s in Afghanistan right
now, where you did see such a tremendous diversity of insurgent groups,
terrorist groups, extremist groups of all types going and hiding and getting
training and fighting a little, but also getting the kind of clandestine training
and weapons training and other things and networking that they needed to
go back to fight whatever it was they were going to fight.

Seth G. Jones: Yeah. And now we – I think one of the interesting prospects, which we’ll
discuss a little bit later, is – and it was certainly the case in the 1980s, as well
as the 1990s – a rise in activity from all the states in the region and their
intelligence and clandestine military forces that provide training to a range
of sub-state groups.

Gina Bennett: Yeah.

Seth G. Jones: So, Carter, let me turn to you, then, and go back to the past.

Carter Malkasian: OK. (Laughs.)
Seth G. Jones: So I’m going to – I’m going to shift us to your book, which actually has some lessons for the next segment, which is the future. So let me begin with your book, “The American War in Afghanistan: A History,” which is – which is just out. Can you – what’s the main question you’re asking, so that folks understand? You say on page five, for example, that your goal in part is to explain how the American war came to a disappointing resolution, but can you put your finger on what the main question you’re asking is?

Carter Malkasian: Well, there’s probably three main questions in the book, but the main one that relates to the thing you just mentioned is: Why did we lose? And “lose” is a powerful, painful word to say. It might be easier to say: Why did we not meet all of our objectives? So that’s –

Seth G. Jones: And what do you mean by “lose,” for example? So what does “lose” mean here?

Carter Malkasian: “Lose” would mean here that we’re – if – we’ve stated our goals many times, to make sure that when we leave Afghanistan that al-Qaida or terrorists will not be able to use it again. Our meeting that objective is questionable.

A goal for a long time was enable the Afghan government to stand up on its own. That appears not to have been met, although there is some possibility that things will reverse themselves and it will be met. But that doesn’t look good in that respect.

And then there were other goals related to democracy and development of Afghanistan that also haven’t been met. Although the main one for the United States has long been prevent a terrorist threat against the United States and enable the Afghan government and their forces to stand on their own.

Seth G. Jones: And your argument here – can you outline your argument? I mean, I found one of the things that’s interesting here is you don’t focus a lot on issues like the – or just the performance of governments like the United States. You don’t focus on even necessarily the performance of the Afghan government or the role of Pakistan.

I’m going to read from page five here. You say: “The Taliban exemplified something that inspired, something that made them powerful in battle, something closely tied to what it meant or means to be Afghan. In simple terms, they fought for Islam and resistance to occupation, values enshrined in Afghan identity.” So can you explain what you mean there?

Carter Malkasian: Yeah, absolutely. And I don’t mean to suggest that that’s the only thing that enabled them to succeed. There are some – there are a variety of conditions that exist. Pakistan is foremost there, and in the introduction I did not talk a lot about it. Hopefully, mulling the book you’d find more.
The corruption within the government or the mistreatment that the government had towards its own people, or that the warlords had towards the Afghan people, that plays a role.

The lack of unity within the government forces and tribes that compose it versus the relative unity that the Taliban have. That's not to say they're some kind of cohesive military force. They're not. But if you compare the two relatively, the Taliban look a lot more coherent than the government does.

So what I wanted to do in the book, though, was highlight this other factor that was striking me repeatedly as I – as I studied Afghanistan: that something more was going on here, that I can't explain how the government is being defeated or the Afghan military is being defeated if I look at solely the factors that we discussed here.

Let's take Pakistan, for example. Pakistan is a powerful factor here. But on the battlefield, if 200 Afghan police and army are confronted with 50 Taliban or less than that, and those government forces retreat, that doesn't have a lot to do with Pakistan. That has to do with something else.

And the thing I wanted to highlight there was how the Afghan forces have difficulty inspiring their men to fight hard. The Taliban can claim to be fighting for things deeply central to Afghan identity: We have an occupier here. You need to go and fight against that occupation. It's in the history of the country. And honestly, it's not something that's solely in Afghan history. It's something that tends to be important for peoples. We saw it in Vietnam. We've seen it in our own American Revolution. So that is a point that the Taliban are able to use. The government, on the other hand, has great difficulty using that point because they're aligned with us and because there is more questioning about is the government really fighting here for what's entirely right.

Now, the Islam part of this is – one needs to be extremely careful with because what I'm not saying here is that Islam is, like, inherently violent or something like that. What I am saying is that for someone who's fighting for the government to know that they're fighting on the side of a foreign occupier plus a foreign occupier who shares a different set of beliefs, they – more difficult to gather motivation, which I don't think is something terribly hard to understand. But again, I do want to emphasize that I see a multiplicity of causes here, but I think this is an important one that deserves highlighting.

Seth G. Jones: Yeah.
And let me – let me turn to Gina for a moment. So Carter’s raised the issue of religion – I mean, Islam. What is your sense – as you look at the 1990s leading up to the 2001 attack on 9/11, how would you differentiate the ideology of al-Qaida at that point with how they were able to establish a sanctuary in Afghanistan? How were they able to relate to the Taliban and the Taliban’s leader? How different is that from the Taliban’s Deobandi ideology? As you get to 9/11, what’s the Taliban’s ideological objective? And how does that differentiate from the Taliban?

Gina Bennett: From al-Qaida?
Seth G. Jones: Yeah.
Gina Bennett: Oh, sorry. (Laughs.) I just want to make sure because you could legitimately talk about two different Taliban – (laughs) – at this point. But that’s a lot of question. Let me try to unpack it.

First of all, I agree with so much of what Carter has already said. I don’t think the Taliban – the Taliban’s ideological goals or its objectives back in the early or mid-1990s I think is the same as it is today, to bring authentic governance to Afghanistan and to its people, who are also Pashtun especially. So that’s not going to change, and I don’t think, you know, that’s ever going to change. So, win or lose, I think that’s what they’re trying to do.

And in terms of al-Qaida, I think it’s important to also remember that al-Qaida was a transplant to Afghanistan in 1996. Bin Laden had the organization in Sudan with him prior to that, after leaving, of course, the Afghan war when the Soviets withdrew eventually. There was a lot in between, but eventually. So coming back into Afghanistan, he wasn’t known to Mullah Omar or the Taliban. He had to ingratiate himself with the new rulers of that part of the country to begin with.

And I mean, all the history books show us there was no love between the two of them. But once a guest, you know, Pashtunwali code taking over, I don’t see that Mullah Omar really had much – (audio break) – different situation moving forward.

Clearly, there are a lot of members of the Taliban who are not friendly towards al-Qaida after what happened, but I think there’s still an authentic code and an authentic culture that is not going to be easily changed. So I expect the same tensions to play out as we saw in the late 1990s and early into the 2000s, so I’m not sure there’s going to be a good deal of change when it comes to that.

Seth G. Jones: So, Gina, as you look at the U.S. actions on 9/11, and then Carter’s book starts to take us through some of the different stages of the war over the next 20 years or so, but from your perspective, you know, there were efforts by the U.S. to get the Taliban to break links with al-Qaida in September and October
of 2001 that didn’t succeed. And so how much of that failure on the U.S. side to try to break links sort of goes to the explanation of what you’re talking about? And how – what does that mean moving forward, in a sense?

Gina Bennett: That was too late. I mean, by that point we had already – there was already an us-versus-them there, I think. You know, we already had the airstrikes in 1998 against Afghan territory. The time to have talked to the Taliban would have been in 1996, when we rejected that idea, when the Taliban might have been willing to consider what we’re asking them now: Don’t let this plotting take place on your territory or it will come back to haunt you. Understand you have, you know, your guests – it’s your country, your territory – but, you know, out of respect for the rest of the world – things like this that might have made a lot more sense in 1996 than they do today. So I think by 2001 it was too late to try to have those conversations for them to be at all meaningful.

I mean, if you – I try very hard to think about the flipside. Like, imagine this scenario played out in the United States. You know, how friendly would we be or how willing would we be to talk to somebody after they have already attacked us? So, you know, it’s just – it’s very difficult. See how difficult it is – we’re not talking to al-Qaida. We’re not coming to the table with al-Qaida, right? They’re the ones who attacked us. Could you imagine us being willing to negotiate with al-Qaida, you know, a couple months after 9/11? Of course not. And I just don’t think it’s different because we’re talking about a different country or a different set of actors. It’s human nature to reject that at that point.

I would say for 2001, just in terms of our reaction to it, I think it’s really important to – especially now, 20 years later with hindsight – be more honest about what we’ve done and why we did it. Because I think, Carter, that’s one of the things I really appreciate about your approach in this book, is surfaced some very difficult and uncomfortable conversations about winning, losing, these kinds of things.

But I have a slightly different view in that I really do believe after 9/11, for whatever strategy overlay you may put on what happened, we were out for justice and revenge. It was a very guttural, emotional reaction to being attacked at a time when an attack of that nature was so shocking, having just survived the mutual assured destruction years of the Cold War, to have something like this happen by individuals who weren’t even the same nationality. You know, they were stateless. They had no military. They had no advantage of any kind. And they conducted an attack like this, which – in three cities that killed over 3,000 people. It was just so shocking that I think America reacted in a way that is very human, and that is to want to see justice, punishment, and revenge.
I think the problem is, as good as that might feel, it’s not a very sound strategic idea. And it is especially not sound or strategic if you don’t first understand what would actually punish your adversary. I mean, instead, we thought of what would punish us and we applied that. We mirror imaged. I don’t think anything that we necessarily did was exactly what would have made al-Qaida suffer the most.

So it’s – this question of winning/losing, success/failure, it’s not a mirror image of each other. You know, what we would see as victory is not the same thing that al-Qaida would see as victory. What al-Qaida would see as defeat is not the same thing as what we would see as al-Qaida’s defeat. And we’re continuing – that’s what we’ve continued to fight with over 20 years, is that misalignment.

Seth G. Jones:

So, Carter, let me – let me take what Gina said and ask you, you know, the initial gut reaction from the secretary of defense at the time – and you talk about this a little bit – Don Rumsfeld, was actually – his instinct was to actually have a pretty low footprint and not hang around for a long time. Was he right?

Carter Malkasian:

Donald Rumsfeld – and it’s, of course, timely that you bring him up – was in some ways prophetic in many ways. He could see some things in the future. Now, he also took a lot of actions that meant that his vision became kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy because he could see the future but he wasn’t able to change the things that he was doing.

And I think, you know, something goes back and is very important to what Gina just said: The feeling of an attack on the United States at the beginning of 2002, after we toppled the Taliban, was still very, very close. It’s closer than President Biden’s election was. It’s closer than the – than the attack – the insurrection on the Capitol is. So that still feels sharp today. At that time, in the beginning of 2002, the attack on us still felt very sharp. Public opinion polls were about 85 percent of people saying they felt a terrorist threat against the United States at that time. And so I think it’s tempting to look back from today and say we toppled the Taliban, we made Osama bin Laden run; we should have gotten out of Afghanistan at that time. But I think that we’re forgetting the context of the time.

And it’s not to say that it’s not – that it’s impossible, we couldn’t have done it. It’s just to forget how visceral it was at the time, how many people still wanted revenge at that moment, and also what the political implications for President Bush would have been if he had pulled us out and then a terrorist threat suddenly reemerged in Afghanistan.

Seth G. Jones:

And to be frank, if you look at the 10 years after 9/11, there were plots emanating out of the Afghan border areas. There was Najibullah Zazi. There
was Faisal Shahzad, the Times Square bomber. So at least – at least the next decade after that there was every reason to believe there were terrorism threats coming from Afghanistan.

I mean, Gina, when – from your perspective, when did or has the threat subsided from Afghanistan to the homeland? Again, there were – there were plots over the course of the 2000s, you know. It, to me, appears that the threat levels have declined to the homeland, but how long did those threats to the homeland continue from the Afghan-Pakistan region?

Gina Bennett: Oh, definitely for years in terms of the ones that we knew were active at the time of 9/11. I mean, I think for a lot of Americans 9/11 was a day – it was a horrible day, but for those of us who are in the thick of counterterrorism and national security it lasted for years because it took that long to really get to the bottom and disrupt all of the plotting that we at least knew of at the time.

But to go back to Donald Rumsfeld again, the unknown unknowns. So we don’t know what we don’t know. And I think – I think it’s more important for the American people to be thinking ahead about how they’re going to react to the next attack rather than is it going to happen or isn’t it going to happen or how are we going to stop it, because it’s that reaction that matters whether or not it’s a success for the terrorists or not.

So, you know, I remember when President Bush said, as I think it was – Black Friday was coming in up 2001 and he wanted everyone to go out and go shopping, but that fear was really present. We also had the anthrax letters and things like this, right? And he was – he was criticized for saying that, but what he was saying was if you don’t let it change you and make you afraid, then you’re defeating the terrorist point, you know. You’re taking – you’re robbing them of their ability to sow fear. And there’s nothing more critical for them than being able to make us afraid. So it’s – you know, if we can ever get to that point where you do have politicians of that level, especially willing to say things like that to the American people, like the power to defeat terrorism is entirely in their hands; they just have to not be afraid of it.

Carter Malkasian: Yeah, I couldn’t agree with that more. Like, it’s resilience. It’s not worrying about it. And if an attack happens, well, we can handle it and carry through. We’ve already shown that.

Gina Bennett: And retaining the independence of your decisions as an individual, as a nation. It’s no different. As an individual, deciding I am not going to look at a Muslim differently because Bin Laden did that. As a nation, it’s we’re going to do what we’re going to do in the world. We’re not going to change what our interactions in the world of foreign policy or national security are because of that attack. That is resistance, resilience. That is real strength. But it’s very
hard to do. Again, the emotional reaction of wanting revenge, wanting to punish the people who did it – those two things don’t work well together.

Seth G. Jones: So I want to turn, Carter, a big chunk of your book looks at actions, including that the U.S. took. You know, ones that I was involved in directly, as were you, the surge. What is your sense about decisions that the U.S. took over the next decade and a half in particular after 9/11? How do you rate kind of the success of U.S. military strategy over the – I mean, what were some of the big drawbacks and maybe even successes?

Carter Malkasian: So I think our strategy overall, we could have managed the war better. We could have made some decisions that would have cost less resources and lost fewer lives. And at the beginning of the war it’s easy to cite a few of those.

Some Taliban, at least, were willing to negotiate in the very beginning of the war. We rejected that. That probably wasn’t the best idea.

Seth G. Jones: Are you talking in part about the absence of the Taliban, for example, at Bonn?

Carter Malkasian: Yes, that’s a part of this. And we decided that they shouldn’t be at Bonn. There is some information that they even sent a letter that they were interested in being at Bonn, but that was turned down by us. I don’t want to play all that up too much, because I understand the complexities of the time, but that was – that probably wasn’t helpful for our strategy. We took a long time to build an Afghan military. And I think if we had worked harder on training it better, on building it up quicker, I would have made things more difficult for the Taliban and would have made things easier for us. And so I was in Kunar on – and Wes Morgan, of course, has written a great book on the whole – all the fighting in Kunar.

Seth G. Jones: I saw you in Kunar when we were there.

Carter Malkasian: Yeah. (Laughs.) But you have to look back and ask: Why were we sending troops to fight in these high mountains? This is incredibly difficult to fight in. It gives the Taliban opportunities for creating casualties. And if you look over – you look over time, you have to ask, well, maybe we shouldn’t have been employing forces in that way. The surge, which you mentioned – and I guess the surge has been covered so much that I don’t really want to get into it in a huge amount of detail.

But looking back now on where things are in Afghanistan today, just about I think every gain the surge made has now washed away, which means that one of the biggest things we should have done and that our military strategy should have focused more on were more options, different things to do than surging. And I was there at the time, so I know it’s not the easiest thing. And I
wasn’t at the time arguing vociferously for more options, so I don’t mean to be pointing guilt at people when I’m probably guilty myself.

But we should have considered more options at that time because what in retrospect would have been better would have been to not increase or increase very small numbers but think about the long haul and how we’re going to have to be there for a while to meet what our objectives were on – or, at least have considered that more fully as an option. So I think – I’d point that as a military –

Seth G. Jones: Carter, a follow up on this. And obviously this question does not undermine the patriotism of all of the men and women that – in the military that served in Afghanistan, and those that died as well. But as we look back at some past decisions, and then we look at some of the lessons that we might want to take for the future, what is your general sense about a warlike Afghanistan, which is an insurgency. It’s not a state-on-state war. The Taliban were not fighting, with some modest exceptions – like around Operation Medusa in Kandahar – were not fighting conventional operations. They were fighting – you know, this is Maoist fighting, guerrilla attacks.

How well – I mean, was it a wise decision to have our conventional forces as part of the surge as well? Most of them that hadn’t trained for this kind of operation. Was it a wise decision to do that? And part of the reason I ask is because when you fast-forward to, say, 2015, and ’16, and ’17 in Syria, the strategy that we used to take back Islamic State territory was not to surge conventional forces, but to leverage, train, equip local forces to do it.

Carter Malkasian: When I look at what happened in Syria, and I got to look a decent amount at that through other work, Syria, the operations in Iraq, and even the operations in Afghanistan that have occurred over the past three or four years represent the maturing of our concepts into something different, into something that is less costly for us and involves the loss of fewer lives. Involving much – or, heavy reliance on air strikes, heavy reliance on ISR and drones, reliance on advisors, soft, small otherwise footprint of conventional forces. So I would argue that that is more of the way to go, and that’s something that would be more sustainable. I mean, General Scott Miller is one of the foremost people who brought this kind of strategy to bear.

Seth G. Jones: Yeah.

So, Gina, part of then the next two decades after 9/11, there’s a pretty heavy focus on – in addition to operations against the Taliban – focus on countering al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan. How would you rate the – our U.S. success in weakening al-Qaida over that time period?
Gina Bennett: That’s a very good question. And it does come back to the question of strength and weakness, and how you define those things, tactical and strategic level. You know, for one thing, on 9/11 there was one al-Qaida. There was one group branded al-Qaida. And today you see numerous al-Qaida groups around the – around the globe. Same is true, of course, of ISIS.

At first there’s one, now there’s a whole bunch. I mean, part of that is a brand. All of the groups, and the networks, and individuals, and insurgencies that brand themselves and rebrand themselves were there beforehand and they will be there after with the next brand and the next brand, until they get what they want in their own locations. So I think it’s – you know, I think it’s important not to read so much into that as all of those groups being – wanting the exact same thing as, like, the core of ISIS or al-Qaida.

On the other hand, there was one al-Qaida. (Laughs.) Today there are more. There are more certainly trained and experienced fighters, as we would have called them back in the day the mujahideen, in the world than there were before 9/11. So, you know, if you look at these things and you add them up, those seem like failures on our part, or at least not success. Or you could look at them and say that’s success on their part because they’ve grown their numbers, they’ve grown their brands. That all may be true.

On the other hand, I think – you know, going back to did we punish, did we get revenge? I would say yes. We punished. We got revenge. I mean, the only – there’s only a couple of people left from the al-Qaida that was involved in the 9/11 alive. And they’re clearly not –

Seth G. Jones: Including bin Laden. (Laughs.)

Gina Bennett: Right. (Laughs.) And they’re clearly not living the best existence. So we got our punishment. We got our revenge, in that sense. And if that feels good, then that’s a success. I’m not necessarily saying that I agree with that, but I’m just – you know, just from a very, you know, calculating way looking at it.

But I think what’s really missing in all this is really going back to 9/11 and having had the restraint to stop in the moment and recognize we are reacting in a very emotional way, but we can’t turn that into a strategic objective. In that case, if you were to really evaluate how do you weaken al-Qaida at that point in time, it wouldn’t have been what we did. I mean, we raised every single al-Qaida member and all their wannabes and supporters’ stature to the level of being enemies of the United States military. If anything could weaken the reputation of the United States military, it’s that.

So I think that was strategically a very bad idea. Raising their stature, you’re feeding the narcissism of terrorists. I mean, it’s all psychological warfare for the most part. So if you really wanted to weaken them, you have to take away
their relevance. You have to take away their following. You have to make them unimportant. And that’s really hard. It’s the same thing we tell our kids about, you know, bullies on the schoolyard. The more you react to them, the more they’re going to feed off of that. It’s no different at this level.

So I think – and the reality is, al-Qaida was defeated when it started. And ISIS is the same way. They’re all defeated at the strategic level. You do not see Muslims flocking to become part of these very antiquated and rigid and idiosyncratic versions of a caliphate on the part that these two groups espouse. Even in Syria, even when ISIS had its own caliphate, it was not – (laughs) – tremendously popular. Statistically zero percent of Muslims believe in this. Zero percent. If that’s the case, then 1.6 billion don’t believe in it. Why aren’t they U.S. allies? You know, why haven’t we harnessed that and helped them crush this outlier within their own world?

I think the problem is we saw an enemy at a strategic level that did not exist. I mean, al-Qaida and ISIS, they’re not strategic enemies to us or anyone. But we give them power because, yes, terrorist attacks are horrible. They’re shocking and they’re tragic. I mean, I’m not dismissing the tragedy. But we add to it when we react in this way.

Seth G. Jones: So one follow-up question on the threat is – it’s almost at the tactical level. Which is: Did U.S. actions, military and otherwise, against al-Qaida after 9/11, over the next two decades, did it – some would argue it was also – it may have been problematic in raising the stature of al-Qaida. Elements of it were successful in eliminating or seriously downgrading the ability of al-Qaida, at least out of Afghanistan and Pakistan, to attack the U.S. homeland. Your sense of whether those people are being too optimistic.

Gina Bennett: I mean, we’re never going to know the counterfactual, right? I think we put too much – we pat ourselves on the back too much that there hasn’t been another homeland attack because of everything we’ve done. That may be true. It may also be that there was never going to be another homeland attack. It was an aberration in terms of the history of terrorism. So maybe that was never going to happen. Maybe we’ve spent trillions of dollars for something that was never going to happen. I don’t know. But it may or may not be, right?

But, you know, I’m in the intelligence community. So I’m going to say that the things that we did in the intelligence community, very behind the scenes, had more – you know, had more impact on disrupting al-Qaida’s capabilities than what the military did in a very conventional way. The other thing is I think it’s also humbling to remember that al-Qaida had the advantage of two years’ foreknowledge of 9/11. We didn’t.
So if we thought we were going to dislodge them from Afghanistan, and they were going to run, and we would never hear from them again, that would not have been a very smart prediction. Because, again, they knew what was going to happen. And so after the 1998 air raids too I’m quite sure they realized that they had to have an ability to continue to operate and make leadership decisions in a dispersed way. So a terrorist group, a terrorist entity is not a state. And you just cannot defeat it the way you can a state. And even then, I think it’s questionable whether or not we defeat states. (Laughs.) So, yeah.

Seth G. Jones: So, Carter, I want to read – we’ve got a few questions from the audience. One of them I’m going to read is: To an observer, it looks at if the U.S. never had a coherent strategy in Afghanistan. Your thoughts on that, or the challenges there? And what does your book – what does your book say about that?

Carter Malkasian: So it’s hard to debate the question itself because it depends, like, how you define coherent. Some people argue that the United States never had a strategy. I don’t think that’s true. There was a strategy. It might not have been coherent, or it might not have been good, but there was a strategy. We’ve had objectives and aims through the entire – the entire experience.

The book would talk about the problems in the strategy had to deal with how we were managing things and would also have to do with that our expectations were often too high about what could be accomplished. The expectations at first being that we were going to be able to basically defeat the Taliban, defeat al-Qaida and defeat the Taliban. For most of the Bush administration, that was basically what the goal was, plus set up a – set up a democracy.

That changed with President Obama. President Obama’s objectives became much more reasonable to – again, to defeat al-Qaida, break Taliban momentum, enable the government to stan up on its own. I think that that strategy was fairly well-formulated, minus the surge parts that we’ve talked about. But over time, we too discovered that those expectations were too high and that those couldn’t be attained well.

Then towards the end of our time in Afghanistan, from about 2015 onward, the de facto strategy, up until the negotiations were completed, was really that we’re staying in Afghanistan not because we think the government’s going to be able to stand up on its own, not because we think we can defeat al-Qaida, or not because we think we can defeat the Taliban. We’re staying in Afghanistan because we recognize there could be a terrorist threat, and the way to suppress that is to stay with sufficient numbers to suppress and prevent the government from falling.
And it’s what General Dunford would call term life insurance. It only exists as long as you’re there. Once you leave, it disappears. And so that strategy, of course, is not very inspiring. No offense, of course, to General Dunford, but it doesn’t – it doesn’t grip the American people as, wow, this is a strategy. This is something you’re moving forward. It’s like taking medicine. This is just – this is – all we can do is this, and we’re doing it to protect America and because we think the costs are sustainable. And then we shift, of course, to the strategy of we’re negotiating. And that was basically negotiating to get out, as we’ve seen.

Seth G. Jones: So you talk a little bit about weighing costs and benefits. What is your sense of whether Afghanistan, by the time now that U.S. forces have withdrawn, is in a better position than when we started? And how would you answer that? Some might point to health conditions have improved, economic conditions for the moment have improved, mortality rates, education, obviously then there’s also the violence level. So how you do you weigh whether the country is better off now than it was in 2001?

Carter Malkasian: Ambassador Khalilzad has a very – a very good quote. And it’s, “Afghanistan’s exposure to the United States has been tremendously beneficial.” And what he means is this relation to – I think what he means is some of the things you’ve just spoken about. Much improvement on women’s rights, education, improvement of things like roads, even if they’ve gone back since then. And even if our funding wasn’t exactly well spent, it did have a lot of benefits to a lot of the Afghans there.

And for Afghans in certain parts of the country, they did have five years of almost – in some places, two decades of living in relative peace. So that’s something for the Afghans. And for those Afghans, our presence has been better. That doesn’t mean it’s been worth the cost to us for that. Did it put them in a better place than if we had left earlier or if we really hadn’t come in at all? In a better place to deal with the Taliban? Maybe. We’re going to see some of that. Maybe the place is a little bit better. Even if they fail in the end, maybe they’re in a better position than they otherwise would have been. Does it put the people in a better position in terms of their human security and their lives? That is a much more debatable question.

Are all the things that just brought up that were good for Afghanistan, that were benefits, is that better than if we had left, the Taliban had taken over, and the Taliban would have provided some degree of security? Because hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been wounded or injured in the course of this fighting. If the Taliban had taken over much earlier, would their lives have been saved, even if they were living under a more oppressive regime? And that’s a fundamental question. One I can’t actually answer. But it is one we should be thinking about whenever we’re intervening somewhere.
Seth G. Jones: Well, we're also going to test that one now too with the withdrawal.

Carter Malkasian: Yes.

Seth G. Jones: So we've got a few minutes left. And we have a question, Gina, for you, which is: The last administration in its National Defense Strategy shifted the U.S. focus away from counterterrorism as a priority to a focus on interstate competition, particularly the Chinese, the Russians, and some of the other plus-twos that you dealt with when you were at the Pentagon – North Korea, Iran. So the question is, what is – what can we expect the terrorism threat from Afghanistan, where it may go over the next two to three years? And how should we think about compared that – compared to other threats the U.S. has to deal with.

Gina Bennett: Yeah. I think the terrorism threat from Afghanistan is – oh, it feels like 1992, 1996 all over again to me. Some days I wake up and I think, ah, how can I – I look this old but it's like 1996. (Laughter.) So I don't – you know, I think we should and can expect that there will be al-Qaida, ISIS, groups like this will consolidate to some extent, that they have every reason to want to continue to plot from Afghanistan, or at least parts of it. Whether they will or won't, or be successful, is a different story. But we should expect a threat from Afghanistan, from the same old adversary. We should expect threats from all these other places where al-Qaida and ISIS exist. We should expect threats from within the United States, you know, on domestic terrorism and, you know, counterparts overseas, and other places.

One of the things I worry about is that we have had this 20 – now 30 years since the Cold War. We have a national security apparatus that has forgotten the use of proxies to poke at each other. If what the world doesn’t want is a nuclear holocaust – which I think we can all agree it doesn’t – then you're going to want to keep the conflict below that. And one of the best ways to do that is to poke at people using proxy groups. As we saw during the Cold War, that’s exactly – terrorism was a sideshow to the Cold War. So I’m not saying that we’re going back to the Cold War. Clearly so many things have changed. But I think we have to expect that kind of competition to happen in cyberspace, in financial markets, in so many – and including through terrorist groups – in ways that are going to surprise us because we’re not thinking about it in those terms.

Especially over the last 20 years, we have this idea, oh, they only come from the Middle East. Which is completely erroneous, but it's still – you can see why so many people would, after 20 years since 9/11, think that way. So I think the terrorist threat is going to be, from Afghanistan and elsewhere, very diffuse but not – that doesn’t – that doesn’t make it – it doesn’t make it insignificant, just because of the diffusion. I hope we've learned that after
9/11. But again, this is why it goes back to what is our strategy for approaching all of it?

When you asked the question about the strategy in Afghanistan and trying to defeat al-Qaida, or even the Taliban for that matter, I think we have had a strategy for the past 30 years that has been defined by what we’re against. And we need a strategy that is defined by what we’re for. And I don’t know how you actually have a strategy based on what you’re against. To me, that’s more at the operational or tactical level. But if what we want to see in the world is the kind of stability that only comes from authentic governance, where the people consent to how they’re being governed, then that’s what we should be standing for.

And you can start to see where the risks to that are not terrorist groups. Terrorist groups are a risk to themselves, and their greatest competition is something right next door to them, within their own local space. They don’t need to be elevated to the international level. What’s a threat to everyone having the ability – people, populations around the world having the ability to be governed in a way that they consent to is that’s all about communication, and diplomacy, and foreign policy, and things that we have just not emphasized in this very militarized national security environment over the past 20 years.

So I think, you know, after – I just keep going back to the Cold War and when the wall fell and the Soviet Union crumbled. And I feel like we thought, oh, we won. Democracy won. It’s over. We stopped competing. That should still be the competition, in my mind.

Seth G. Jones: The last question, Carter, goes to you. We’re at the end of the – end of our time here. And thanks to you both. We’ve got a question from the audience, which is: What are the future scenarios for Afghanistan? What are – I’m not asking you to predict – (laughter) – and I’m building – not actually predict what is going to happen. But what are the possible outcomes for Afghanistan over the next two to three years? And what are the key factors that’ll drive us into some of those directions?

Carter Malkasian: So one possibility is the Taliban continue with their offensive movements, as they’ve been doing, and in short order manage to take places like Mazar-i-Sharif or Kandahar, and then they’re able to take Kabul itself. In which case, they would be able to control – gain control over a lot of the country, maybe with pockets of resistance here and there. So that is a serious –

Seth G. Jones: That’s sort of where the Taliban were by 9/11, actually.

Carter Malkasian: That’s right.
Seth G. Jones: Where they had taken over most of it except for some –

Carter Malkasian: Valleys.

Seth G. Jones: Valleys here and there.

Carter Malkasian: That’s right. So I think that is a real – that is a real possibility. Afghanistan has a history of when they suffer a large defeat in the field, or a major city falls, that it causes a collapse of everything else. And it is – Thomas Barfield talks about it in his book. It’s that the Afghans see which way the wind is blowing, and they all go – and they go in that direction. So that’s one way things can go. But that’s not necessarily how things will play out in the next two to three years.

There’s another possibility that, yes, the Taliban will gain ground, they’ll move into various places, and the government will be in a difficult position. But either the government or another coalition of Afghans who don’t care for the Taliban so much will be able to survive. They might be able to survive if the Taliban lose a little bit of cohesion with us gone. It’s possible. That’s kind of what happened for the famous Battle of Jalalabad in 1989. I don’t put a lot of stock in that, but it’s a possibility.

There’s also a possibility that the Afghans under pressure – you know, good leaders, stronger leaders – or, the strong leaders that they have now will emerge into positions of greater authority and be able to do more. It’s a possibility. Again, one that we may or may not want to put a lot of stock into.

Some things that we might put more stock into is that the region may become more interested. That if the Taliban look like they’re going to take over Kabul, Russia, Iran, India – maybe not with – probably not with troops. But maybe through other forms of assistance will stop helping the Taliban so much and help the government more. And the government will be able to –

Seth G. Jones: More sub-state actors, militia forces.

Carter Malkasian: Exactly. And then the government survives, but it would be in a civil war environment and a lot more fragile than we see today.

Seth G. Jones: Great. Well, lots more questions, I think, that we have both from me and the audience. But we’re out of time. So I want to thank you, Carter, not just for being here but for writing a book, “The American War in Afghanistan: A History.” And thank you, Gina, as well, for your thoughts on Afghanistan, al-Qaida, 9/11, counterterrorism, and actually bringing us way above just the tactical level to who is the enemy and strategic-level questions. So thanks to both of you. Thanks to both of you also for the extraordinary time you’ve spent over the last couple of decades on this problem set, because you’ve
spent a significant part of your career in the government dealing with it. So thank you.

Carter Malkasian: Thank you for your role in that too.

Gina Bennett: Thank you. Thanks. I need one of your crystal balls. The future of Afghanistan. (Laughter.)

Carter Malkasian: Well, we'll see how it turns out. (Laughter.)

(END)