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TRANSCRIPT

Event

"A Conversation with Thomas West in the Context of Afghanistan One Year Later"

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FEATURING

Thomas West

Special Representative for Afghanistan and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State

CSIS EXPERTS

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Daniel F. Runde: So I'm Dan Runde. I'm a senior vice president here at CSIS. Thank you for joining us today, a little over one month after the one-year anniversary of the forcible Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August of 2021. I was not in favor of us leaving Afghanistan, but it's easy for me to sit in an ivory tower and opine about these things that other folks have to take the difficult decisions.

We are very fortunate to have Mr. Thomas West, the State Department's special representative and deputy assistant secretary for Afghanistan. Mr. West is a very able public servant, and he has an excellent team. And it's very important that we have great people in government, like Mr. West. And so I'm really pleased that he agreed to go back into public service.

Mr. West has had a very interesting career in the foreign policy world. He's followed the Afghanistan file for a very long time, and he's been an important policymaker on Afghan issues. He served as a special advisor to the vice president for South Asia. And he was director for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the National Security Council from 2012 to 2015. From 2011 to 2012, Mr. West was the State Department's senior diplomat in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. Before rejoining the government in January of 2021, Mr. West was a vice president at the Cohen Group, a global strategic advisory firm. And he was also a nonresident scholar of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

We're going to have a conversation with Mr. West today on this very timely topic sort of one year after the forcible takeover by the Taliban of Afghanistan. So, Mr. West, thanks for being with us today. I really appreciate it. So I'm hoping you might just share some initial thoughts, and then we can have a conversation.

Thomas West: Thank you for that kind introduction. You know, CSIS is an institution that's revered globally for its thought leadership and foreign policy. And I really appreciate this opportunity. Thanks to all for coming here in person. It's nice to see folks actually – I think I did a think tank event some several months ago, but it was entirely virtual. It was an empty stage. So it's nice to see folks in person. And thanks, especially, to those who are connecting virtually from Afghanistan.

It's been well over a year since the Taliban forcibly took power in Afghanistan, as you said, Dan. And so it's an opportune moment, from our perspective, to take stock – to consider how enormously difficult this year has been for Afghans, to review the robust and ongoing international economic intervention in Afghanistan that aims to relieve suffering, that aims to enhance basic economic stability in the country, to look back at how the international community has organized to engage with the Taliban as well as Afghans from across the country, and to maintain and to refine our

focus on protecting Americans on ensuring that Afghanistan never again becomes a haven for terrorists who can threaten the United States or our allies.

But, Dan, before getting into some of those details on these and other issues, I want to repeat the United States' overall objective in Afghanistan. This is something I said several months ago, and it remains true today. We wish to see and to support the emergence of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan that never again harbors terrorist threats to the United States, our allies, or any other countries, and in which the rights of all its people – women and men, boys and girls – are upheld. It's often

in foreign policy that you will offer up a lofty goal. And I also want to be clear that we're not pollyannaish about how far we are from achieving that objective. But you need to have an objective in mind, and that is the United States' objective.

I want to touch on a few of our critical priorities and update the group. First, terrorism. To state the obvious, the Taliban's sheltering of Ayman al-Zawahiri in downtown Kabul was a flagrant violation of the Doha agreement. He was unquestionably a threat to the United States, and he had greater freedom to operate in Kabul than from wherever he came from. As the president made clear, Zawahiri coordinated with al-Qaida branches around the world, he set priorities, he called for and inspired attacks against the United States. And so his sheltering is unacceptable and it is a major breach in our engagement with the Taliban.

We have been in touch with Taliban leaders since the strike. And to be clear, even in the wake of this event we are prepared to engage pragmatically with the Taliban regarding terrorism concerns. There's a lot we can talk about on this subject, and I'm sure you'll have some questions. I look forward to questions from the audience. But ISIS-K is a common enemy. The Taliban have a vigorous and robust effort ongoing against that terrorist group. The Taliban have exceedingly close ties with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and there are negotiations ongoing. My sense is that they're not proceeding very successfully, between Pakistan and TTP.

We have concerns about al-Qaida in the Indian subcontinent. Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Ansar Allah. There are a range of terrorist groups that still have an active presence in Afghanistan that we're extremely concerned about. And just lastly, on the subject of terrorism, I think it's worth mentioning we're very glad that there has not been an attack against the United States or our allies over the past year. I think this was a question in all of our minds as we withdrew. And that's not to say that we're not exceedingly vigilant today, or that we're still worried. But that's a fact that's worth noting.

Now I want to pivot to the humanitarian response and to economic stabilization and just mention a few things.

The first is that the need is still great. Over half the country's population – over 21 million people in Afghanistan – are in need of emergency humanitarian assistance. The very robust response that the United States and many of our allies and relief organizations put together over the winter months and into the spring and over the summer, what was the result of that effort?

We prevented widespread famine. We prevented, I think, a fulfillment of the worst predictions from last fall. We're not patting ourselves on the back because, frankly, when you look at the coming winter many predict that it could be even worse.

The causes of this humanitarian crisis are many. The country has experienced one of the worst droughts of the past 30 years. The pandemic has cratered the economy. Certainly, this has always been an exceedingly aid-dependent economy and that's a tough trap to work ourselves out of.

But we want to roll up our sleeves and problem solve, and that's what we've done over the past year. The United States has stepped up. Last week, we announced the contribution or an additional $327 million in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. That brings our contribution over the past year since last August to over $1.1 billion.

We passed seven general licenses and championed a U.N. Security Council resolution designed explicitly to enable relief actors to scale up to meet the need. I would highlight that General License 20 encourages licit economic activity for companies that want to do business in Afghanistan.

We've worked creatively with international financial institutions to make available to the Afghan people well over $1.5 billion to support basic services programming. We're going to continue to work with international financial institutions.

This coming next month, like we do every year, we'll have an important set of meetings at the World Bank, and certainly Afghanistan is going to be a focus of those engagements.

Earlier this month, we launched the Afghan Fund. This is a sensitive issue – the matter of Afghan reserves – and so I think it's incredibly important for the United States to be transparent with the Afghan people and with those who care about the stability of the Afghan economy, about the purpose of

this fund, its governance, any potential uses. So I want to say a few things about that.

So, first, on governance, there are – there is a board of trustees that, basically, will make the major decisions of the foundation that has been launched. There are four members. Two of the members are Afghan experts, Dr. Ahady and Dr. Mehrabi. Mehrabi has, for a long time, been sort of an advisor to technocrats at the central bank. He's a college professor in Maryland. Dr. Ahady is a former minister of finance, former minister of commerce and industry, former governor of the central bank.

These are two people who we believe are not corrupt, who have the requisite expertise to make responsible decisions regarding the stewardship of these assets.

The other two members of this board of trustees will be an American government representative and a Swiss government representative. No decision, no disbursement, can be made without the full consensus of these four folks.

I think it's also important to note that we need to see other Afghan voices included in the governance structure of this foundation and so I think one of the first acts of the board of trustees will be to develop an advisory board of additional Afghans that reflect the richness and diversity of the country as well as expertise that is in abundance.

I want to mention two challenges that we face on the economy. The current approach that we've put together is not sustainable. It's incredibly expensive to intervene in a humanitarian response like this.

I think, Dan, you've done a lot of research on this subject. You know more about this than I do. But you look ahead five years from now, we can't engage in exactly this way. Now, what a different approach that entails real capacity building really looks like, I don't have all those answers.

And I certainly hope that CSIS and others in the think-tank community help the American government, help the international community, to figure this out, because if you look at other situations in which we've engaged – think of Haiti. I'm not a Haiti expert, but we spent $13 billion in that country over 10 years and, you know, the country does not have the capacity to stand on its own two feet. And so we don't want to be there in 10 years in Afghanistan.

Another challenge is that the Taliban are a counterpart, and they are not moving with alacrity or responsibility on economic decisions in the manner in which we certainly hoped that they would. And I could give you many examples.

On human rights, my colleague Rina Amiri is our special envoy for Afghan women, girls, and human rights. She's exceedingly capable. She has a long track record of work in the United Nations, in the NGO community. So I am proud to call her a colleague and I am glad that she has the full confidence of the American government to lead on these issues.

But we've got to be honest. As Richard Bennett, the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Afghanistan, has said, just taking one example, the role of women and girls in society, they're being systematically erased. They're not able to work, by and large, throughout the country, to participate in the political life of Afghanistan. They don't have a seat at the table, as they should.

And this is not just a matter of a fundamental-rights imperative. This is an economic imperative. If women are allowed to work in Afghanistan, they will contribute over a billion dollars to the economy. And so I think the message that many internationals have taken to the Taliban, including in the Afghan private sector, is that they should allow women to be educated and to work, because it is in the fundamental interest of the basic economic stability of the country.

We were very proud last week, Rina and I, to join Secretary Blinken in launching the Alliance for Women's Economic Resilience. I would challenge American companies to join, to make a significant contribution, to think creatively about how we can empower women in Afghanistan today. Deloitte and POD (ph) have stepped up. They will mentor the first 2,000 of a million Afghans that we hope will receive guidance and support from some of our brightest minds in those companies.

We have to think creatively. And I would be the first to admit that the United States in government, we don't have all the answers. And so we were very proud to announce that initiative.

The final thing I would offer, Dan, before we get to questions, is that there still is an imperative to see a political process unfold in Afghanistan. And we saw in June a gathering of ulama in Kabul. They were handpicked by the Taliban. They did not represent the richness or diversity of the country.

Without a serious national political dialogue about the future of the country with Afghans who have genuine support within their communities, I really do fear – and I think this is a consensus – that what we see now is a pause in 44 years of conflict and that we could see a return to civil war in time. And within our analyst community, the question is not if but when we will see the reemergence of conflict.

And so I think it's incumbent on the think-tank community, again, the Track 1.5 and 2.0 community, to think about helping Afghans to organize themselves, to not think that the international community should handpick 15 or 20 Afghans and seek to impose those individuals on a process. I think if we do that, then those Afghans will be discredited; that that is a process that will probably be dead on arrival.

There's an active dialogue under way among Afghans, inside the country, at subnational levels, in the diaspora. And I think an effort needs to be made to coalesce and to merge these processes as we look ahead. There was a lot of this work that was done in the '90s, in the early 2000s that laid the groundwork for Bonn, and so we want to support those efforts going forward.

Mr. Runde: Thanks, Mr. West. Thanks for your service. You have a very challenging file, but a really important file, and I think there's a temptation in Washington –

maybe outside of the American government – I know we have able people in the government who are thinking about these issues.

But I would say that Afghanistan has receded from the newspapers, and there's, I think, an understandable – I think an emotional response to say, I'd really – I think many people would say, I'd rather not think about it because it generates a lot of emotions – some of which are shame and anger. And I think that we may not be interested in Afghanistan in Washington as much as I'd like us to be, but I think Afghanistan may be interested in us and may come back to reach out and touch us in ways we don't like.

So, I continue to be – you know, want to continue to support hosting things like this because I believe that it's important that we continue to put some attention on it for all the reasons you've just laid out.

We hosted the foreign minister of Bangladesh a couple of months ago, and Bangladesh is an amazing success story in South Asia. It has a higher GNP per capita today than India does, and in 1972 it was listed by an undersecretary of state as a basket case. It's not a basket case anymore, and it's on its way to becoming an upper middle-income country.

One of the reasons is is that they've invested in women and girls, and if you look at the level of education of women and girls in Bangladesh, it's the highest in South Asia. And what strikes me is there's a direct correlation to the success of Bangladesh and the investment of women and girls. So, if Afghanistan wants to be a real country, like Bangladesh is now a real country, they would do those sorts of things.

There's a lot of challenges. There's rapid urbanization in Afghanistan. There's something like 400,000 young people join the labor market every year in Afghanistan. It's growing – it's one of the most rapidly growing societies in the world demographically, and so, it's going to be a consequential country. And it's geographically located in a difficult neighborhood, but it's also a very strategic neighborhood, and that's why it's continued to draw attention over several centuries.

So, let me start first with a couple of big questions. Let me start with, there have been attempts at what I would describe as a peace process for at least 10 years. We could – whatever you want to call the Doha process. You know, it seems to me that there was sort of attempts to kind of come to some sort of a – that the – there's been a conflict in Afghanistan since at least 1979.

What does the outline of peace in Afghanistan look like that doesn't kind of look like the current Taliban arrangement, if I can put it that way?

Mr. West: Sure. So, I – you know, Dan, one thing that I find heartening in discussions with Afghans inside the country, discussions with Afghans outside the country, influential folks who have left – there's near unanimity on the question of armed opposition. Afghans do not want to see a return to conflict by and large.

So, I'd say – I think with zero exceptions, every Afghan that I've spoken to wants to see a political dialogue unfold. There is a lot going on at the subnational level that we don't see. We don't have an embassy in Afghanistan anymore. We don't have consulates.

We are very lucky to have a robust U.N. presence. UNAMA is led currently by Markus Potzel, a capable German diplomat. He was in Washington a couple of weeks ago for a U.S.-Europe group, where we discussed a lot of these issues in detail. They have 11 field offices across the country.

And again, I think one interesting observation that I picked up from those discussions is that there is a dialogue among Afghans ongoing at the subnational level. We saw in a couple provinces – I won't mention them specifically so as not to make them a target – but some courageous Afghans who have stood up and called for their daughters to be educated, called for women to return to work, and I think that Afghans have – fortunately or unfortunately – the most leverage over the Taliban now. And I'm hopeful that the Taliban will begin to heed those calls.

Mr. Runde: Is there a country that is comparable? Is it Bangladesh? Is it something like – what's the – you know, where's the – it just strikes me that –

Mr. West: What's the example?

Mr. Runde: Yeah, what's the example.

Mr. West: Gosh, you know, Afghanistan is a very unique country. As you said yourself, emerging from 44 years of conflict, an unprovoked Russian invasion in 1979, a

horrible civil war to follow. And they're going to have to find their own path. They really are. But it will be a combination of some of the systems within the region and hopefully lesser and lesser aid dependence over the years.

Mr. Runde: When I was there in 2019 I asked to meet with someone who was not a supporter of the Afghan government, I think was the way I think I framed it. So I met with a religious leader of one of the large mosques in Kabul. And so I had a two-hour meeting with him. And I asked him I said: Well, you know, there have been women leaders in Indonesia, in Bangladesh, and so – in Pakistan. Could you imagine a female leader leading Afghanistan? He said that wasn't Islamic. I thought that was sort of a – I didn't know what to do with that answer, but that was his answer. And I just said, OK. And so I do think there's a variety of views in the country about what a political settlement looks like. And I worry that it's those sorts of voices that are currently the ones that are, you know, making those

sorts of decisions. I think we're seeing that with the girls in school, among other things.

Mr. West: Well, look at a TOLO poll that was just taken. You have better than 90 percent of the country, in informal polling, calling for their girls to return to secondary school, calling for women to return to work. So this decision is – has been made by a tiny minority of the country. Frankly, even within the Taliban I think the majority would like to see their daughters educated.

Mr. Runde: Yeah. But what I've said to senior leaders in neighboring countries is if your head of state wants to win a Nobel prize, help us solve the girl in school problem in Afghanistan. So if you're the – if you're the head of state in Qatar, or the head of state of Pakistan, maybe your head of state would like to win the Nobel Peace Prize. If you want to win the Nobel Peace Prize, help us solve the girls in school in Afghanistan. So one of the neighboring states, if they can solve that, we ought to give them the Nobel Peace Prize. And so Norway ought to help us with that and dangle that out as a carrot.

Mr. West: Hmm. Dan, if I could, though, I think it's important for us not to treat girls' secondary education as – I mean, certainly it's a massive litmus test.

Mr. Runde: Yeah. I think it's enormous litmus test.

Mr. West: But even if all girls are back in school between seventh and 12th grade next month, we have a bigger issue of letting women participate in society and work. These two are fundamentally connected, in my view. What's a college education if you can't go work?

Mr. Runde: OK, I agree with all of that. But so let me come back to this – the political dialogue. There was extensive, ongoing political dialogue in Qatar for a long period of time. Did the Taliban lie to us about conducting a serious dialogue with Afghans from the Kabul government, and reducing ties to terrorist groups? Or do the Taliban think that we lied to them?

Mr. West: There were a lot of weaknesses in the peace process that the Biden administration inherited. So I'll just talk about the two sides. On the Afghan – on the Islamic Republic side, you had a negotiating team that –

Mr. Runde: This is the Ghani government.

Mr. West: The Ghani government.

Mr. Runde: Yeah.

Mr. West: That was run by a team that reported directly to President Ghani and other close advisors to him. Their hard line was, in my view, and in retrospect, not pragmatic, not reasonable. They wanted an acceptance of the 2004 constitution. They wanted a continuation of President Ghani's presidency. And maybe some interim setup with a modicum of power sharing. There were also pragmatists on that negotiating team who understood. There were even some folks who, over the past 30 years, have been the most courageous rights advocates in that country, and have stood up. And they understood that fundamental compromises would need to be made.

On the Taliban side, we had the folks we were talking to in Doha, but then we had a different group of folks in Quetta who were making decisions about whether or not to seriously entertain a negotiated settlement. Quetta won out, and that is why they pursued the forcible takeover that they executed.

Mr. Runde: Is there a way forward to persuade the Taliban to follow through on its commitment to women's rights in education and employment?

Mr. West: You know, again, I'd say that I think Afghans have the most leverage over the Taliban at this juncture, and we've seen courageous Afghans from across the country really stand up and demand fundamental rights.

I think if the Taliban make the right decision, it will not be because the international community has stood on principle and wagged our finger –

Mr. Runde: It will be because they are not invited to Davos – that the Taliban are not going to get an honorary degree at Yale. That's not what's going to do it.

Mr. West: No.

Mr. Runde: OK.

Mr. West: I think it will come from, you know, tens of thousands of Afghans organizing, and sitting with district governors, and sitting with governors and, you know, making public appeals as they have. I think that is what will make the difference.

Mr. Runde: So I wrote a report a couple years ago saying that, if we left, and there was a forcible takeover by the Taliban, that they would host – that there was any number of different terrorist groups already operating in the country, that this could become

sort of the Harvard University of terrorists, and they could – you know, they could kind of go run – you know, run amok, and that we might get hit again.

And so there have been some calls – I think General McMaster did a – wrote a piece recently that I think got a lot of attention –

Mr. West: Sure.

Mr. Runde: I took it very seriously – saying that it makes – we may have to worry about Afghanistan again. And so there are different views about the degree of the terrorism threat in Afghanistan today.

How concerned is the administration about the resurgence of al-Qaida, but how about also other terrorist groups in Afghanistan? And what is the most dangerous terrorist group operating in Afghanistan today?

Mr. West: I'll take your last question first, Dan. I worry most about ISIS-K. They are – there was a big prison break that was covered in the news in the waning days of the republic. I don't know who within the Taliban opened the jail doors, and I don't think they knew exactly who they were letting out, but some of the most concerning, best-trained ISIS-K fighters were let out. And it was a good 2,000 individuals. Some of those individuals our folks were truly worried about, so certainly we've lost the kind of monitoring capability that we had. I'd be misleading you if I said we have the same kind of capability that we used to have in the country, but in answer to your question, we are most worried about ISIS-K.

And again, we find ourselves in this strange world. The Taliban are taking very active efforts against ISIS-K and, in a lot of ways, we hope they succeed.

Mr. Runde: Let me come back to women and girls. What's the status of the consultative mechanism you announced at USIP on August the 2nd to incorporate the voices of Afghan women directly into policy considerations?

Mr. West: Sure. So the short answer is it's up and operational. Within days of the launch of that mechanism, the deputy secretary of state, Wendy Sherman, and Rina and I held a quiet dialogue with a number of Afghan women specifically about the character, the scope, the nature of the international economic intervention in Afghanistan.

Since then I have had follow-up conversations with a different group, but I think there can never be enough consultation with Afghans about the nature of our engagement with the country and in the country.

Mr. Runde: OK. We've got a dilemma in the U.S. as we've got a number of humanitarian other interests in Afghanistan. It's got the level of development of Malawi, so it's a very poor country as you were saying earlier.

We also have other interests such as access to education for women and girls; in counterterrorism as well. How are we protecting and pursuing all these interests while also making sure we're not further strengthening the Taliban?

Mr. West: Dan, we've got interests to protect. We want to see an economy – an Afghan economy where Afghans stay in Afghanistan, and so that merits the kind of robust support that we have developed.

One positive thing I can say is that we have backed the shipment of hundreds of millions of physical dollars into the country since last August – I think it's actually over a billion dollars at this point – that would not have happened without comfort from the United States government. It's going to an Afghan private bank.

The Taliban have not seized that money. I think they understand that, you know, the work of relief organizations is vital and that interference would interrupt that effort in a real way.

Now, that's not to say there hasn't been some worrying intervention, particularly at subnational levels. But when the interference gets unacceptable these relief organizations are pausing their work.

So I know that over the past several months there have been hundreds of millions of dollars of programming that has been suspended, and you sort of pause and you withdraw, and you allow those relief organizations to try to work out a new modus vivendi with district governors, with provincial

governors, with Afghans in the province. And by and large, we see over a period of weeks that relief organizations are able to resume programming in time.

Mr. Runde: What are our – what responsibilities does the Biden administration believes that the U.S. still has to Afghans in Afghanistan – that can be humanitarian, human rights, economic, terrorism – as well as to our former partners, those with us in the media, NGOs, universities? Have we been meeting those responsibilities?

Mr. West: So, first, I think we have a responsibility to the American people to protect them, which is why, as the president has made clear, we will maintain an unwavering commitment vis-à-vis terrorists in Afghanistan.

We've reorganized our capabilities in the region. We're monitoring carefully, and on July 31st we took action to remove the leader of al-Qaida from a safe house.

Mr. Runde: Can I just say thank you for that? I was really proud as a taxpayer when that happened. I was – I want to just thank you for – whoever did that, I want to thank them very much for doing that.

Mr. West: Yeah. It wasn't me. (Laughter.)

Mr. Runde: OK. But whoever did it, would you tell them, please, thank you from one happy taxpayer, please?

Mr. West: We have an extraordinary intelligence community and we will –

Mr. Runde: Thank you, Lord. I sleep better at night for them, really.

Mr. West: We have an extraordinary intelligence community.

Mr. Runde: Great. I was really glad they reached out and solved that.

Mr. West: Me, too, and we did it without any civilian casualties, which is not always the case, and he deserved it.

Mr. Runde: He totally deserved it. Thank you.

But what about these other responsibilities? I worry about all of the – all the folks who are with our door kickers, the translators, the women who, you know, went to universities and –

Mr. West: Right.

Mr. Runde: – took risks, the folks who were – you know, human rights activists who put their lives on the line. Are we meeting our responsibilities to these folks?

Mr. West: Sure. Sure.

So our assessment is that there is not a systematic nationwide effort to conduct reprisals of former ANDSF former prosecutors, judges, translators, and the like. That's significant.

Now, there have absolutely been reprisals that have occurred, and Human Rights Watch has reported on that extensively. So have various news outlets. So has UNAMA.

But, again, I think that the Taliban are sincere in wanting to see a policy of no reprisals actually carried out. We haven't seen them, I think, take action to bring perpetrators of reprisals to justice. I have not seen that. But I think they're relatively sincere.

Now, on the matter of our responsibilities, the effort to relocate Afghans to whom we owe a special commitment, that effort continues.

Mr. Runde: Have we finished that job?

Mr. West: No. No, and I think it will continue.

Mr. Runde: So we still have ongoing – we have ongoing responsibilities we haven't completed yet?

Mr. West: Very much so.

Mr. Runde: OK.

Mr. West: And that is a subject of dialogue with the Taliban. I think they have committed that if folks have passports and visas that they can travel, by and large.

Mr. Runde: And they've, largely, honored that?

Mr. West: Largely, they have. Yeah. People are not leaving – you know, people are not being relocated at quite the clip that we would like to see. But it is continuing.

Mr. Runde: OK. OK, under what circumstances can you imagine the U.S. recognizing a government in Afghanistan? We currently don't recognize the government in Afghanistan right now.

Mr. West: Right. So this subject of recognition comes up a lot in conversations about Afghanistan and I think it's important to recognize that in our system this term recognition doesn't really carry a lot of weight. There's no memo where I'm going to write to Secretary Blinken to say, you know, I recommend you not recognize or recognize a particular state or government. We think more in terms of normalization and steps toward normalization. And I'll mention just five things that no country has done. No country has moved any of Afghanistan's assets back to the central bank, not the United States and not the other four countries that hold over $2 billion in their assets.

Mr. Runde: China? Russia?

Mr. West: They don't hold Afghan assets in their system, as far as I know.

Mr. Runde: OK.

Mr. West: No country has advocated for sanctions removal in the U.N. system. Certainly, we have done general licenses. We have not passed one sanction against the Taliban since last August. No country has advocated for the formalization of Afghanistan's relationships with international financial institutions, so you don't have, say, a Taliban representative to the World Bank or to the ADB or to the IMF. The Taliban permanent representative nominee, so to speak, is not sitting in New York, did not attend the U.N. General Assembly. And except in the region, no country has welcomed Taliban diplomats to their capitals. Now, those are five big steps toward normalization that I think are yardsticks.

Mr. Runde: Pakistan hasn't welcomed the –

Mr. West: There are Taliban diplomats of a relatively junior level serving both in Islamabad as well as in the consulates in Pakistan. That is not a step that the United States would take. It's not a step that any of our allies would take, but that is a fact.

Mr. Runde: OK. OK, let me – so I don't want to Monday morning quarterback this too much, but I – and I think I'm in the minority, maybe in this room and on this topic, but I didn't

think we should leave. So could you just – I think this is an important enough topic. Could you please spend a minute making the argument as to why leaving was the right thing to do?

Mr. West: Sure. Let's look at what the Biden administration inherited first. We inherited a presence of roughly 2,500 troops. The Taliban had not

conducted an attack against U.S. forces, had not killed an American soldier in roughly 11 months, consistent with the Doha Agreement that the Trump administration concluded. I was not a part of the Trump administration, but it's my understanding that decisions made to withdraw troops during that administration were untethered from the negotiation that my predecessor, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, led. And so I think the Taliban were conditioned to believe that many of the pieces of the agreement, the Doha Agreement – for instance, intra-Afghan negotiations, reduction in violence – were not as important to the United States as they should have been. So the president faced a choice. He could surge troops in Afghanistan again and condition our withdrawal on the achievement of a political settlement, or we could withdraw and focus on other strategic priorities, and in my view, the president made absolutely the right decision. It was not an easy one and we grapple with the reality that millions of Afghans are suffering needlessly now and we have a different toolkit today than we did then. But as a person who served in Afghanistan, who, you know, if I'm being honest, during the Obama administration certainly argued against a withdrawal – I still think the president faced a really tough choice and made the right one for the United States.

Mr. Runde: OK, thank you. I've got several questions from the audience I wanted to share with you. Would the U.S. government consider assisting U.S. investors in using the term "harvesting" – I'll put in quotes – "harvesting" critical minerals in Afghanistan instead of allowing China and Iran to access these minerals for possibly nefarious – or, you know, China and Iran from "harvesting" these minerals? Maybe that's the way to describe it. So what's your reaction to this?

Mr. West: Sure. So let's take just one example, the Mes Aynak copper mine. The Chinese won that tender back in 2007. I don't think that one dollar or Afghani –

Mr. Runde: One ingot has been extracted from the mine?

Mr. West: Not that I'm aware of. I do not actively track other Chinese activity vis-à-vis mining, but –

Mr. Runde: That was sort of the rap, right? We would leave, and then the Chinese would stick a giant straw in Afghanistan and suck the rocks out.

Mr. West: Sure. Sure. I'm not seeing that today. And I don't see it on the horizon.

Mr. Runde: OK. OK.

Mr. West: You also asked about American investment. Not one American company has come to me, come to us –

Mr. Runde: So if they came to you, you'd consider it?

Mr. West: The business environment in Afghanistan, needless to say, is unbelievably challenging. But, you know, the general licenses that we have passed certainly encourage companies to engage in licit economic activity. And so I think we would consider a request on the merits.

Mr. Runde: OK. Another question is: We hear a lot about divisions within the Taliban. What can you tell us about this? And what can be done to give more voice to actors that favor girls' education and integration of Afghanistan in the global community?

Mr. West: So, Dan, that's really a question for the Taliban. I'm not going to speculate on divisions. But I would say that, you know, there are different voices.

Mr. Runde: There's been a debate – and you've talked about this earlier – there's been debate about what to do with the Afghan bank reserves.

Mr. West: Sure.

Mr. Runde: What is the status of these reserves? You talked a little bit about this? Will the reserves in Switzerland be preserved for future Afghan governments, or will they be spent now?

Mr. West: Sure. And I didn't get to this in opening remarks, but I should talk a bit about uses. So if you talk to economists about these reserves, what they would say is that they should not be spent on humanitarian assistance. This is the country and the Afghan people's only shot at a future recapitalization of the central bank and of the financial system. And so I think it'll be put to the board of trustees to make decisions but, you know, I am quite confident that the vast majority of this money will be preserved for future recapitalization.

Now, there are a few near- to medium-term uses that could enhance the country's macroeconomic stability, to keep the country current on its arrears to international financial institutions. Why does that matter? So that we could

unlock much greater resources for basic services in Afghanistan. The first resort should be the Afghan central bank. Back in June, the Afghan central bank made a very responsible decision in paying down on some World Bank arrears. They are in arrears again now, but that's one potential use.

Another potential use would be to conclude priority transactions. So to see – there was just a piece in the L.A. Times yesterday that went on about this in

detail, but currency in Afghanistan, actual banknotes, are on the verge of disintegration.

Mr. Runde: Physical disintegration because of the quality of the paper?

Mr. West: That's right. They're supposed to last roughly three years or so. Many banknotes have been in circulation now for, you know, over 10 years. And so shops won't

accept them. The central bank won't accept them. They need new banknotes in the system.

Mr. Runde: If I recall, we helped print them somewhere else back maybe 10 or 15 years ago.

Mr. West: You know, I'm not sure that the United States or an American company did that. You might be right, but there are currency manufacturers today that some of them are sitting on new banknotes. This Afghan fund would support the conclusion of those transactions to see new banknotes introduced into the system.

Mr. Runde: So I could list these, but I think from listening and also just, you know, following this, but what do you consider the administration's main achievement since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Afghan theater?

Mr. West: I don't like that term, achievement. I would say there are outcomes.

Mr. Runde: How about outcomes?

Mr. West: Yeah. The outcomes of our policy in Afghanistan that have been positive. I said it before, I think it is certainly positive that we have not seen a terrorist attack against the United States, or our allies, or our interests in the region emanating from Afghanistan. That's not to say there haven't been terrorist attacks against Pakistan, also against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, but that's, you know, one outcome of our policy, and also of our engagement with the Taliban.

Relocations have continued. I'm not going to get into numbers, but you know, there are a lot of Afghans to whom we continue to owe a special commitment, and that is positive. And on the economic front, look, we could have looked at Afghanistan and done exactly over the past year what we did in 1992 or so when the mujahideen finally took over.

Mr. Runde: Just bug out. Pull the plug.

Mr. West: Yeah, exactly. We haven't done that.

Mr. Runde: I remember "Charlie Wilson's War," the movie, right, that's what happens at the end, right?

Mr. West: Sure. Yeah, yeah, that's exactly right, and you have the scene of Tom Hanks sitting down with the members of Congress and, oh, can't you give me this or that. You know, when I go up to the Congress, I find – both among Republicans as well as among Democrats – an understanding that it's in our interests to continue to engage.

So, I'm hopeful – look, it's only been one year. That's a pretty short amount of time. So, let's look at where this conversation sits in five years. Are we still engaged in Afghanistan? Are we still seeking to stabilize the economy? Are we still encouraging the Taliban to broaden and to make responsible decisions? Let's see.

Mr. Runde: OK. So, I agree that the U.N. is a really important actor in Afghanistan. You've referenced that. And they seem to have been doing a pretty good job of stalling or worsening the humanitarian crisis. We talked a little about that.

But how are we, the United States, monitoring cash, food, and other distributions to make sure that the Taliban are not directly directing or controlling the delivery of assistance at the community level?

Mr. West: Sure. Sure. So this $1.1 billion that we have channeled to humanitarian relief actors, it's largely run through USAID, of course. We have arrangements in place to be sure that third-party contractors independently monitor this assistance. We have feedback mechanisms on the ground, and when there are complaints of misuse, we immediately seek to address them between third-party contractors and implementors.

It's a huge area of focus for USAID, and it will remain so. You know, at the moment, I can tell you I'm not aware of sort of a major, major problem of misuse or diversion of humanitarian funds to date.

Mr. Runde: OK. What's the U.S. prepared to do within the U.N. system to strengthen the international community's – to strengthen UNAMA, which is the U.N. rep and its new special representative? What are we doing?

Mr. West: So, the new U.N. special representative I have not met her. She is a former head of state of Kyrgyzstan – Roza Otunbayeva. I think she's starting the coming weeks. We're looking forward to working with her.

Mr. Runde: Great.

Mr. West: You know, she's going to bat a really high level.

Mr. Runde: So, she has an open invite to come here. We'd happily host her here at CSIS. So, if anybody's in touch with her, we'd happily host her here. Please, let her know that.

Mr. West: Yeah, I will. UNAMA has – I think, frankly, we worried about UNAMA's mandate when we headed into renewal several months ago, and we secured a terrific and robust mandate for governance, humanitarian aid delivery, the human rights situation, and monitoring.

And so, we're pretty happy with the mandate. There are no big funding problems at the moment. Again, they've got 11 field offices. They're up and operational. The U.N.'s role is going to remain central in Afghanistan.

Mr. Runde: OK. Special Representative West, I really appreciate you coming today. It's been – I've learned a lot. You have a difficult file. I think it's important that we continue to pay attention to Afghanistan. As I said, we may be less interested in Afghanistan, but I fear that Afghanistan may continue to be interested in us in ways we may or may not like.

I think the issue of girls in school and women participating fully in the economy, I think real countries allow all the people in their society to fully participate in education and work, and it's not going to be a real country until that happens.

And so Bangladesh, no one can tell me – I can look at Bangladesh and I can tell you what – you know, what a great country Bangladesh is. And so anybody that tells me – any scholar – quote/unquote, "scholar," that tells me otherwise, they're wrong. So, you know, I just think it's a bleeding sore in the country that they're not allowing girls to be in school and women to fully participate in the economy. And it's – I think it's very, very awful.

Mr. West: Well, Dan, thank you for this opportunity. Thank you to CSIS. And to all Afghans watching, welcome your input. Thank you for your courage. And you're at the center of our thinking when we make decisions about the way ahead.

Mr. Runde: Please join me in thanking Mr. West. (Applause.)

(END)