HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Government policy on Afghanistan, HC 685

Tuesday 23 November 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Neil Coyle; Alicia Kearns; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 211-250

Witnesses

I: The Right Hon. Rory Stewart, former Secretary of State for International Development, and Lord Richards of Herstmonceux GCB CBE DSO DL, former Chief of the Defence Staff.

II: Rudra Chaudhuri, Director, Carnegie India, and Kori Schake, Director, Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute.

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Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: The Right Hon. Rory Stewart and Lord Richards of Herstmonceux GCB CBE DSO DL.

Q211 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session. We are very lucky to have with us today Lord Richards of Herstmonceux, the former Chief of the Defence Staff and commander of ISAF forces in Afghanistan, and Rory Stewart, who has been a Minister in various Departments and also set up the Turquoise Mountain foundation, which worked out of Afghanistan.

Before we start, I must declare an interest. I was the military assistant to General Richards when he was Chief of the Defence Staff.

Rory, I am going to start with you. You called the international withdrawal "a total betrayal" and "a catastrophic failure". What should the UK Government have done differently, once the US announced its departure from the Doha deal, and then in April?

Rory Stewart: There are two separate issues. One is the question of whether to withdraw at all. The second is how you do it if you have made that decision.

To begin with the first question, the key point is that I believe very strongly that we had a position that could have been sustained in Afghanistan. A relatively light footprint would have been capable of preventing the Taliban from holding district capitals for a prolonged period of time. In other words, essentially what had been happening since 2014, which is that the Taliban was a rural insurgency that was capable occasionally of taking district capitals but then was driven out, was something that could have been maintained with relatively few international troops, and in particular with international air power.

Would it have been possible to convince the United States to remain? Probably not. That is very unfortunate, but probably not—although there is a question about whether concerted diplomacy from NATO over a four or five-year period, particularly directed at an incoming Biden Administration, might have been able to appeal to President Biden's repeated statements that he himself was in favour of a light footprint. He has been saying that back to 2009.

The second question is would it have been possible, once the US had announced it was going to go, for the other NATO countries to take up that slack? I think the way in which that would have had to happen is with the US agreeing to continue to provide a lot of the enablers, perhaps a lot of the civilian contractor support for the planes, but some sort of agreement where the UK, France, Turkey, Germany, Italy, Spain and others would say to President Biden, "Okay, you can get your boots off the ground, which is what you are committed to, but we need the following forms of

support to continue to be able to support the Afghan National Army and prevent the Taliban taking over."

Let me stop there, because that is probably the first big question, which is whether or not it might have been possible to prevent the withdrawal at all. I think the final kicker to that would be to say that, if it really were entirely impossible to do that, that suggests something very worrying about the capacity of non-US NATO countries to operate in any degree of independence. After all, the French seem to be able to operate with a certain degree of independence in Mali, and I would have thought that it should not have been beyond the wit of man to imagine keeping a few thousand coalition soldiers on the ground, particularly if we had an intelligent conversation with the US about the type of support and enablement that it might have been able to provide.

Q212 **Chair:** General, clearly, you worked with NATO partners in many different capacities, not least commanding in Afghanistan. When you were Chief of the Defence Staff, you worked around the NATO heads' table, the CHODs table, do you think there was a capability in NATO to have in any way replaced the US and to have sustained an operation without the US? Do you disagree with Rory's views?

Lord Richards: No. Not for the first time, I agree with virtually everything Rory has just said. I think it was a strategically illiterate and morally bankrupt decision to leave Afghanistan. The other NATO nations—here maybe I disagree a little with Rory—if they are to be believed when they claim that they did not agree with President Biden's decision, could and should have made it very difficult for President Biden to execute that decision, if they had really acted up when he took it. They did not; they went along with it, as far as I understand—not necessarily willingly, but without much push-back or counterargument. The strategic price for the West and NATO, let alone the humanitarian impact of that decision, is self-evident, but they did not really argue. If they had fought hard against it and said, "We're not going to co-operate in the future with you in other areas", they could have made a difference to him and his thinking. Certainly, they could have delayed it to be executed over a more sensible timeframe.

As to whether NATO could have fought on without them, or with just enablers, I am sceptical. I agree with Rory that they most certainly should be able to, but the reason that NATO is going through a transformation process at the moment is that those in the know recognise that without full American participation, they are something of a paper tiger and it needs sorting out—not just because of Afghanistan.

Q213 **Chair:** That raises a whole series of questions that we will not come to in this session, but perhaps in another one. You also spoke, General, about your own surprise at the speed of the Taliban's advance. I think you said you were "stunned" by it. Why do you think that this came as a surprise to so many?

Lord Richards: I was stunned by it in that when President Biden took the decision—I am always mindful of Napoleon's great dictum that morale is three times more important to fighting spirit than equipment—as soon as that happened, the Americans took the rug from under the Afghan armed forces and police. In particular, their technical support was removed when all the contractors, recognising which way this was going, left rather peremptorily. Contrary to the claims that were made about the Afghan army not fighting, we know that that was most certainly not true, but if you know or sense that you are going to be defeated, you are not going to hang around for too long. That is exactly what happened.

I was not stunned once President Biden had taken the decision, although I suppose it surprised me how quickly it happened, but I knew it was inevitable. Without that backing, they were going to be defeated. They are not idiots.

Q214 **Chair:** Rory, were you surprised at the speed of the advance or, like General Richards, did you see that collapse was imminent?

Rory Stewart: It travelled more quickly—certainly in days—than I was anticipating. I was in Kabul at the end of last year, and people were already very anxious about what would happen if the US withdrew. Certainly for us, running a charity on the ground, we were already beginning to put evacuation plans in place for those staff whom we thought would be most vulnerable. We and most other non-profits on the ground were anticipating that if the US left, the Taliban would massively strengthen their position. I did not believe that they would be able to pull it off by 15 August. That was an extraordinary rate of advance; they were taking district capital after district capital. Even when they were on the edge of Kabul, there was still a reason to believe, historically, that it might have been possible for Kabul to hold out, as indeed it did in the mid and early '90s. None of that happened. Why? I think we—particularly Britain, but the US as well—have to ask some very deep questions about the way that we analyse countries.

Why did it collapse so quickly? We did not take seriously enough the fact that US contractors were absolutely essential to keeping those planes flying. We did not take seriously enough the fact that the Afghan national army, in its outposts, found it very difficult to survive without those planes to do the ammunition, the resupply, the medical evacuation. We did not take seriously enough the number of ghost soldiers in the Afghan army; the Afghan army simply was not of the size that we believed it to be. We probably did not have a deep enough understanding of what was happening with the militias associated with some of the warlords, such as Ismail Khan, Dostum and so on. There was a tendency to overestimate their strength.

What is that? It is a failure of political intelligence. It is an example of a mission in which an enormous amount of money is spent, including by Britain—billions of pounds were spent—but which simply does not have the staff focused on those kinds of issues. We would not have had anyone in the embassy who was there to really question what would happen if US

contractors were removed. We did not have people who were really focused on understanding the strength of Dostum or Ismail Khan. We did not have people who were really looking into ghost soldiers in the Afghan national army. We thought it was fine to spend billions of pounds on training the police, or in development aid, while not actually investing in people to understand what was going on.

Q215 **Chair:** Clearly, the focus of the Committee is the governance of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. You are identifying a very specific failure of analysis in our own embassy, in our own diplomatic teams.

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. It is a rottenness at the heart of the British Foreign Office and development system. The Treasury has cut staff again and again. For complicated reasons, including modern management techniques, we have fewer and fewer people who speak languages very well. There is less and less incentive to spend a long time in a field. The appetite in Whitehall for detailed political reporting diminishes all the time.

The truth of the matter is that if you were sitting in the embassy in Kabul, and I, as a Minister, had suggested that the kind of things I have just mentioned were priorities, people would have looked at me as though I was completely mad. They would have said, "We don't have the resources to do that. There is no appetite for that in Whitehall—there are no consumers for that—and we're not sure we would even be able to deliver it."

Q216 **Chair:** Thank you very much. General, do you disagree with that analysis of the state of the Foreign Office?

Lord Richards: No, but I think it is much wider than the Foreign Office. I would like to know what the National Security Adviser and his team were doing. He is responsible for the execution of agreed strategy—the strategy was corrupted by then. What were the intelligence services, and the MoD's and armed forces' intelligence feeds, telling us at the same time? There is no doubt that Rory is right: the Foreign Office has been stripped of much of that capability, but there is more to it than just that. There should have been a compensation, somewhere within Government as a whole, that picked up those facts. Clearly, it failed to do so.

Q217 **Graham Stringer:** Lord Richards, you described the decision to leave as "morally bankrupt". Was the real moral difficulty in staying in Afghanistan after bin Laden had not been caught and had escaped through the Tora Bora mountains, and after al-Qaeda had effectively been destroyed? What business did we have staying in Afghanistan for the next two decades?

Lord Richards: Well, Osama bin Laden had escaped to Pakistan, but the threat that he posed clearly remained were we to create a vacuum again. I would argue that for 20 years, we achieved our main strategic aim, which was to keep those ungoverned spaces broadly governed. It certainly was not possible for terrorist groups to flourish once again. As soon as we left, we began seeing—mark my words—people who are in those places in

Afghanistan right now plotting to do another 9/11. They will not do it this year, I hope, and probably not next year, but at some point they will, and unless we come up with a strategy to counter it, in the next few years we will regret coming out of Afghanistan. As Rory Stewart said, we could have sustained that operation and campaign at little cost for many years to come and continued to achieve our aims.

Q218 **Graham Stringer:** So, your conclusion is that we should be in Afghanistan and other ungoverned spaces for our own protection to make sure that another Bin Laden doesn't attack either this country or one of our allies?

Lord Richards: Not necessarily in those countries. You would have to judge each country on its merits, but in Afghanistan I think, yes. If the Taliban got back in, which they have now done, given the pressures on them and their lack of all-round capability, there is no doubt that there is now a risk that the successors to al-Qaeda, if not al-Qaeda itself—though we know there is still a residual risk from the latter—will exploit the ungoverned space and the opportunities that will emerge. It was our grand strategic objective in first getting in.

I suspect you want to talk a little bit about nation-building, because there is a gross misunderstanding about the purpose of nation-building. If you are only going into a country to achieve military effect, you are going to lose the population and you are, therefore, going to lose, so you have to give the population something good that comes out of the bad, if you like. That is what nation-building is all about.

I am still involved a lot in Afghanistan, and I was giving some help to an Afghan PhD student literally two evenings ago. She is living in Denmark, and she made the point to me that the numbers that want to come out of Afghanistan, which are much bigger than we are able to accommodate, speak legions for the fact that they do not want to live under the Taliban. All these things are intertwined, but nation-building is part and parcel of an effective counterinsurgency strategy. The bottom line is that it was designed to keep us safe.

Q219 **Graham Stringer:** Can I ask the same question to Rory?

Rory Stewart: These are big issues—

Graham Stringer: It is a big issue, Rory, yes.

Rory Stewart: Fundamentally, the problem that we are facing now is that we are stuck in a world where we imagine that we either do nothing or we go in in these huge trillion-dollar operations. The only sanity we can hope to emerge with for the international community is to try to work out how to do things smarter and lighter over the next 20, 30 years.

I am really worried that the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan are going to lead to a world of total isolation. I notice now that the US is very reluctant to really get involved in Ethiopia or Sudan, or to think about what positive role the UK, Europe and the US could play in the world anymore. We are

getting into a crisis of legitimacy. We are losing confidence, and I think the way to rebuild it is to remember that we were able to achieve things—in Bosnia, for instance. General Richards was able to achieve things in Sierra Leone. The choice does not need to be between doing nothing and going in with a trillion dollars and losing all those lives.

Q220 **Graham Stringer:** Can I ask for your view on nation-building? It appears that a lot of dollars and some pounds were just going into the pockets of Government Ministers and officials and not to the people in Afghanistan. Do you agree with Lord Richards that we and the Americans were successful in nation-building? It doesn't seem that way from the fleeing of those officials with bags of loot.

Rory Stewart: I think that Afghanistan is a very mixed picture, like any very poor country in the world. One of the problems is that we tend to see it in black and white. GDP per capita tripled. Millions more children, including girls, went to school. Areas like Kabul and Mazar in the north, and even some of the rural areas such as Bamyan and Hazarajat, are much better than when I first saw them 20 years ago. When I first saw Afghanistan at the end of the Taliban period, it was terrible—one of the poorest places in the world. Maybe one in five children were dying before the age of five. Life expectancy was 37. Twenty years of enormous investment made a huge difference to millions of Afghan lives in bits of the country. In other parts of the country—Helmand Province in the south and the areas around Kandahar and Paktia—it was much more difficult. They remained very violent, very poor and very insecure.

If you were to talk to many Afghans, I think they would say there was huge waste, huge corruption, and a lot of things went wrong. Incidentally, that is not unique to Afghanistan. Speaking as a former DFID Secretary of State, I am afraid the truth of the matter is that development projects all around the world face those problems, because there are problems with states in very poor countries. Nevertheless, a lot was achieved, and many millions of Afghan lives got much better until the moment at which this very sudden, unnecessary, stern withdrawal handed the country back to the Taliban and basically plunged it into a humanitarian crisis. We need to take the blame for that, not the Afghans, because the Afghans had lost 40,000 lives in fighting since 2014, and Britain lost not a single soldier in the period of 2014 to 2021.

The last seven years has been an Afghan-led fight. Ultimately, the Afghan national army stopped fighting, but that was because we disabled their air force, we abandoned them with no resupply, and we crippled their morale.

Q221 **Royston Smith:** I am grateful to both General Richards and Rory for being here to talk about the present and the future, but I am interested, too, in the past. Everyone was taken by surprise at the speed with which the Taliban took control, though some people on the ground, such as Save the Children, thought that that was almost inevitable; they could see that happening more than perhaps our security forces could. The "morally bankrupt" decision—a view that I agree with to some degree—was morally bankrupt 18 months ago, when it was taken. Did we hear

enough voices about it then? Were people then making the case that what has happened was likely to happen when the allied forces withdrew? Do either of you have an idea of whether any of those voices were loud enough? Were those warnings taken to Government, and were they heeded?

Lord Richards: My understanding is that they were not. I am in the same place as you, as I interpret it. When the then President took the decision 18 months ago, there was, among those who were interested in Afghanistan—it was in the middle of covid, and it got slightly lost in the noise—a belief that this was a bargaining position, and it was not going to actually happen. Then Zal Khalilzad, whom I know quite well, and those who were monitoring it—there were not many of us—began to realise that this was a man with a mission. He really did think, "As long as you don't attack US forces, anything else is up for grabs." The Taliban, I think, couldn't believe their luck. They went on committing all sorts of atrocities in Afghanistan, and there was hardly a whimper out of the west or out of America. The Doha process went on.

People like me were hoping that President Biden, when he became President, would at least cause a pause, but I met President Biden when he was vice-president, and remember that he was pretty opposed to what we were doing in Afghanistan even then—I am talking back in 2012, 2013—so perhaps we were being a bit naive about it. His own chairman of the joint chiefs and others recommended that he should not go ahead with this. As I understand it, those in NATO military circles and our Chief of the Defence Staff also recommended that this not happen, at least until it had been properly thought through, or that it should happen at a better time, or be more sensibly executed. All that fell on deaf ears. Then the G7 met and NATO met at presidential/Head of Government level. There was no real pushback. Remember, in Cornwall, there did not seem to be any great debate about it. If those leaders were opposed to it, it did not become an issue. I am afraid, even though the indicators were all there, nobody either took it seriously enough or was prepared to fight hard enough to prevent it from happening.

Rory Stewart: This a classic case of optimism bias—a classic case of people hoping for the best. The backstory is exactly as Lord Richards has pointed out. People felt, "Okay, Trump said he was going to withdraw, but in the end, he didn't." He was talked out of it by his generals and his diplomats. The sense was—I was going to say the hope was—that if Trump could be talked out of it, so could President Biden.

People trying to produce an optimistic story would have said that in 2009, Biden was explicitly against a total withdrawal. He was against the surge, but he was also against withdrawal. You can see him on the record, in September 2009, in the situation room with President Obama, saying "The footprint we need in Afghanistan is a few thousand troops in Bagram air base and Kandahar conducting our operations," which is an exact description of what he inherited in 2021.

I was with President Ghani—I was staying in the presidential palace in Kabul—at the end of last year, and I spent a lot of time trying to talk to him about what he thought Biden would do. There were two things that came out of that—very understandable, for a politician. First, he did not want to irritate an incoming President; he thought he could deal with it when he was in—he was hoping for the best. Secondly, he didn't quite believe it would happen.

So, what could we have done about it? Theoretically, had Britain and other NATO countries produced a really compelling, well-informed piece saying "This will be a catastrophe"—really good military and political intelligence reporting, saying, "We believe, dear United States, that if you do this, the whole thing will collapse like a pack of cards, because this is what will happen with resupply; this is what will happen to the US contractors and the air force; this is what's going to happen with the militia,"—it might have had an impact. However, Britain didn't want to do it, and this is the problem here.

Basically, if any of us in this room had been jumping up and down, talking to the British Government, we would have got a shrug of the shoulders: "Not really our problem—US problem—not much we can do about it, I'm afraid. We've got other priorities to worry about. This isn't something the Prime Minister cares about deeply, and we're not going to put an enormous amount of resources into trying to fight this." At the core of this issue is the question: does Britain want to lead? Does Britain want to take responsibility? I believe that at the moment, Britain and the Foreign Office are not interested in taking that kind of responsibility or lead—in taking an original and difficult position and fighting for it.

Q222 **Neil Coyle:** Given the operational chaos we saw, particularly in August, even if the US had agreed to an extra two or three months, do you think that would have prevented some of the scenes that we saw, particularly in Kabul?

Lord Richards: As a soldier, I agree with Rory's analysis that if we'd never taken this decision, we could have sustained this campaign for any number of years. There was no great military pressure, and it was successful in our fundamental aim of keeping the Taliban and their terrorist lookalikes off balance so that they couldn't seize the initiative. They were always having to respond to us, which is an important part of any military strategy. If we had sustained that campaign and taken the decision that people like Rory and I were advocating, then I don't think we would ever have seen the chaos in August that we've talked about.

Q223 **Neil Coyle:** Rory, did you want to come in on that?

Rory Stewart: Yes. The planning could have been better. This is really a question for military planners and logisticians, but the French started moving people earlier. Had people been aware that the Taliban would have been in Kabul on 15 August, they most certainly would not have been trying to conduct an evacuation of that sort. People might, for example,

have tried to hold on to Bagram air base longer, and the United States certainly could have moved forward its SIV candidates more quickly.

Those final days were a combination of two things: a determination, by the President, to get out as quickly as possible, and a refusal to really acknowledge the pace with which the Taliban would advance. If the President had shown more flexibility and had—*[Inaudible.]*—been given the job of focusing on how to do an evacuation more smoothly, they certainly could have done it better if they'd been given another three months to do it.

Q224 **Neil Coyle:** When you talk about a light footprint, are you talking about the UK going it alone, or are you suggesting that there were potentially other allies—the Commonwealth, or whoever it might be—that could have stepped in? Were the Afghans making any case for other countries to be involved, in the light of the US position?

Rory Stewart: Those are two separate questions. Regarding a light footprint, certainly other countries were committed. Turkey, for example, remained on the ground after other people had withdrawn—Turkey is a NATO ally. I definitely think that, had we started early enough, we would have been able to reach out to France, Germany, Spain and Italy. Key to this would have been to have had a conversation with President Biden in advance, saying, "We understand you want to get your boots off the ground, so let's have a serious conversation about how we do this transition. Can you keep drones in place? Can you keep air support in place? Can you keep your command and control mechanisms in place? Can you keep your civilian contractors on the ground, maintaining these planes?"

If those conditions had been put in place, then we definitely would have been able to reach out. It would not be a question of Britain doing it alone, although remember that we are spending well over £40 billion per year on our defence budget; it ought to be possible for a country spending that much money to, for the sake of argument, keep 3,000 soldiers on the ground. The fact that we cannot tells us a lot about the way in which we spend our money. Many people, particularly in the British Army, would argue that some of the expenditure on the Navy and the Air Force has made it more and more difficult to do that—but that is maybe more for the Defence Committee.

Q225 **Neil Coyle:** There are further reductions in personnel to come. Lord Richards, did you want to come in on that?

Lord Richards: Rory has put his finger on a big issue. Do the British armed forces have the capability to effectively launch, ab initio, virtually a new period of the Afghan conflict and then logistically sustain it? That would be very difficult, I think. As he says, that is perhaps an issue primarily for the Defence Committee. However, in terms of foreign policy and our ability to execute it, it is something that this Committee might legitimately look at, too.

We are going through a period of transition. If you believe the hype, in about 2035, we are going to fight wars in a completely different way, through cyberspace, AI, naval activity—all these sort of things. However, between now and then, we have a vacuum that makes it very difficult to execute the sort of foreign policy and national strategy that we are talking about. I would say that one of the big things for the Committee to examine, not necessarily now, but in the future, is the disconnect between our national policy and our ability to execute it through a coherent strategy—a plan. It seems to me that that is where the integrated review is lacking. It is a great academic paper, but our ability to execute it is pretty woeful, I think.

Q226 **Neil Coyle:** Does global Britain's apparent lack of influence over the US worry you? What is your assessment—either of you—of relations between the US and UK now and going forward?

Rory Stewart: The first thing is that, since Suez—since the 1950s—the UK has been the closest ally in the world to the United States. An enormous amount of the way that we do our foreign policy, and an enormous amount of the way we arrange our intelligence and our military, is in relation to the United States. When I started as young diplomat in 1995 and I asked one of my bosses what we were supposed to do on an issue, he said, "We do what we always do, which is find out what the US is doing and do a little bit less." They obviously appreciate the—*[Inaudible.]* That has developed more and more. As Lord Richards pointed out, we do not really have much of an independent capacity to operate without, in particular, their logistics and command and control networks of support.

The problem that we now face, with what Biden has done, is that it is a brutal way of treating an ally. Britain went into this conflict and we sacrificed an enormous amount. An enormous amount of very brave men and women gave their lives in Afghanistan, fighting in this coalition. As a country, we got behind that strategy, and defended it in Parliament and to the public. However, suddenly we woke up one morning and found that President Biden did not want to do it any more—and he did not consult. Instead of saying, "You have been our No. 1 ally for 20 years—let's do this together," he did not seem to care any more.

In fact, Prime Minister Boris Johnson claims that he tried to get a call with President Biden on the Sunday, when Kabul fell, but Biden did not return the call until the Tuesday. What is the problem with that? The problem is that the next time the United States asks us to make a really big investment of that sort, there will be people in the British Government who say, "Hold on a second. How serious is the US with that?".

That brings me to my final point. The post-world-war-two order has been based on America having a consistent vision of the world: right the way through the cold war and the post-9/11 period, there has been a vision of American values, American power and who American allies and American adversaries are. It is connected with American ideas of democracy, human rights and markets, and it is fundamentally connected with the idea that the US has been—for better or worse—a very powerful global policedom.

That is why the US is still concerned with the question of what China does with Taiwan.

We are now moving into an era where all of that is being questioned. It was questioned by President Trump, but it is increasingly clear that President Biden—from a totally different political tradition—is increasingly following Trumpian isolationism, which leaves Britain in a very difficult situation. We can no longer be confident of the philosophical principles, vision and values that will underlie US strategy going forward. That makes it difficult for us as a junior partner.

Q227 **Neil Coyle:** Thank you. Lord Richards?

Lord Richards: I agree. It does make life a lot harder in our calculations. That is why, a minute ago, I was banging on about our ability to execute the integrated review, which, for want of a better term, tries to express our defence strategy for the years ahead. Our ability to execute that strategy has to be rethought.

That said, for historical reasons, I suspect the break in 1956—that is, the Suez crisis—was even greater than this, and yet, because of a fundamental identity of interest in most areas with the Americans, we have come back together and done our stuff, loyally, on their coat-tails. The fact is that any idea of an independent defence strategy on any meaningful scale is pretty fanciful at the moment; it would take both us and the European members of NATO completely revising our assumptions on defence expenditure, and so on.

I was very involved with the Libyan campaign, where I insisted successfully, without much effort, with Prime Minister Cameron and our French allies that we should not engage in Libya without American involvement because we just do not have the required capabilities. We are in hock to the Americans, in some key areas—from choice, through our membership of NATO. It is a huge question that we would have to examine—the question of whether to divert away from the Americans because we were worried about their ability to deliver in the way we have always assumed they would on our behalf and with us.

Q228 **Neil Coyle:** Coming back to Afghanistan, despite having 18 months to prepare, the former Foreign Secretary blamed military intelligence for our lack of readiness for an evacuation on the scale necessary. There was a very unhealthy, nasty counter-briefing affair. Where do you think co-ordination fell short? You mentioned strategy, Lord Richards. Was it that there was no strategy, that strategy was badly applied, or that it was not overseen at the right level of Government? You have written about the National Security Council perhaps being better able to oversee such a strategy, if we are ever involved in anything like this in future. Who could have better ensured that things were ready, and that they worked at the point at which they were needed?

Lord Richards: This is the one positive lesson that can come out of what happened in August. There are probably a number of levels of responsibility. Some work well. On the execution of the actual, rather

chaotic extraction—I commanded three non-combatant evacuation operations when I was a younger officer, so I know a bit about them—given that those involved went quite late in the day and found a chaotic situation on arrival, that probably worked as well as could be expected, and I absolve them of any blame.

I think that the fundamental responsibility lies not necessarily with individuals, but with the process at the top. Once we agreed that we would go along with the American decision because we had no alternative, that required a new strategy. A strategy is just a coherent plan to deliver on a policy, the policy being that we would now get out of Afghanistan alongside the Americans. As far as I know—I may be wrong—there was no strategic rewrite, and I think that should have happened. That would then have cascaded down the chain of command in the case of the military, but it would have been the same in the case of the Foreign Office and the Home Office, for example, and maybe others including the intelligence agencies would have had their own sub-plans in order to execute that strategy.

As far as I know, that did not happen, and people were left in vacuums. It was poorly co-ordinated. There is no mechanism in central Government—I used to call it a national command and communications centre, but I would be happy to call it anything—probably under the Prime Minister and therefore under the National Security Adviser, to co-ordinate strategies of this kind. That does not seem to happen: they stay within their stovepipes. I mean, Cobra is not set up to do this at all. I described Cobra rather rudely as antediluvian; I am not saying that necessarily, but it is a pretty antiquated approach to doing things—a bit 19th century in its approach. Who is doing all this tidying up? Who is injecting the high-tempo decision-making process that you need?

By the way, that would not only be in examples such as Afghanistan. I know there are many other occasions when one would have benefited from this sort of essentially military command and control mechanism, which would be civilianised and obviously works ultimately for the Prime Minister.

Chair: Can we bring it back to Afghanistan specifically?

Q229 **Neil Coyle:** Well, that question was on Afghanistan. I think Rory was going to come in, but it is about where the strategy did not work and what could work better in future. I think Lord Richards has answered that, but Rory, I'll come to you.

Rory Stewart: I would defer to Lord Richards on the logistics. I completely agree with him that the guys on the ground at that airport in those last days did a heroic job—an unbelievably difficult job. They had tens of thousands of Afghans trying to swarm in. They showed immense humanity, they worked incredibly well, and it is a miracle that we managed to get 15,000 people out, so it is a huge tribute to the British soldiers and others—including some civilians—who managed to do that

last-minute panic. I cannot imagine anyone being able to do that with any degree of skill.

The problem, going back, is that those people on the gates did not have a clear framework within which to operate. They did not have the time to prepare, and there wasn't clear guidance on who they were supposed to be letting through. One of the most awful things about being on those gates is that there was complete confusion about whether what they were saying was, "We're only going to take people who are British citizens and have worked directly for the British embassy and the military", or whether we were also going to try to call forward human rights activists, female judges, Afghan Ministers, and—goodness knows—eventually somebody who was running a dog rescue operation in Afghanistan.

The problem there is that it puts the soldier on the gate in an absolutely impossible situation—they are staring at people being crushed to death; people are trying to pass babies to them. Every single Afghan at that gate had a reason to get evacuated and felt that they were in mortal danger, but we simply did not have the policy framework to help them work out what you do in that kind of situation.

Q230 **Neil Coyle:** Thank you. I am glad you both praise Operation Pitting, but you have also both mentioned Suez. After Suez, heads rolled, and no one seems to have taken ultimate responsibility for the humiliation in Afghanistan. Do you think the Foreign Secretary deserved a promotion to Deputy Prime Minister?

Lord Richards: I am still a semi-serving soldier so that is not one I want to answer. I think the Prime Minister obviously was the obvious—he fell as a result of Suez. On a serious point, Rory and I are saying the same thing. Ultimately, the Prime Minister went along with the change of policy—he may not have liked it—and that should have signalled his team to then come up with a new strategy to deliver on that policy, and then its oversight and execution. That is where it went wrong. I am not suggesting—I have been there, done that and it's bloody difficult. I am the first to admit it. But something went wrong here in the execution of a revised policy. What we could constructively do as a result of what went wrong is now look at how we execute at national level, in a new 21st-century environment, the command and control, as we call it in the military, of events such as those we witnessed in Afghanistan. It is not working and we cannot afford another one of these.

Rory Stewart: This is very uncomfortable for me. I was a direct colleague of Dominic Raab and I like him. I was a direct colleague of Philip Barton and I worked closely with him in the Foreign Office. I would say that they are part of a bigger systemic problem, so I am not going to chase those individuals. The bigger systemic problem is a lack of seriousness, responsibility and grip around the issue of Afghanistan. The fact that so many people were effectively on holiday in August when this thing was happening is not just about those individuals. It tells you an enormous amount about the British system and that it is not professional and serious

enough. That would not happen, I am afraid, in the American system. Americans simply would not be taking all the staff from those situations.

If we want to be global Britain and be taken seriously as a diplomatic or military power, we are going to have to act seriously. There are all the signs of that. The holidays are just one of them. I would add the lack of investment in political military intelligence, the lack of serious thinking and basically the British idea that all you have to do is write a big cheque and say in the House of Commons, "We've contributed x hundred million to something" or, "We have deployed x thousand troops" and somehow that resolves the issue.

Q231 **Alicia Kearns:** Lord Richards, I want to take you back to some comments you made earlier. You touched on nation building. Do you think that our efforts to build institutions in Afghanistan failed, and if so, why? Why do you think we failed to recognise that the programmes we had in place, whether it was all manner of conflict, stability and security fund programming, were not working? Or do you think they were working?

Lord Richards: I think it was work in progress. In 2009, I remember being—sadly, I was on the front page of *The Times*—not ridiculed but questioned when I was up in Edinburgh having just recently come back from Afghanistan, when asked by the BBC how long I thought we should be there for. I said probably for another 20 to 30 years, emphasising that I did not mean that in the combat role—and nor were we. Within five years of that, we had gone into the training and mentoring role. But I felt that we would have to be there for one and a half to two generations to make sure we achieved our strategic aim. I stand by that. If you think about it, with Korea, that is what the Americans have had to do. With Northern Ireland it is that sort of period. These things take that sort of time. Much of what we did was successful.

I believe we could have done more early in the case of Afghanistan, but we initially went, largely because of Mr Rumsfeld although it was also supported by Lakhdar Brahimi and others, for what was known as a light-touch strategy. I am not certain here that Rory would agree with me, but I would have gone for a big injection of support early on to take the rug fully away from any residual worries, from the warlords, from the more corrupt-leaning members of Government and so on.

Notwithstanding all that, it was work in progress. It was successful in some parts of the country and, as Rory said earlier, less successful in other parts. Why did I mention that it was morally bankrupt? We were defeated of our own volition in Afghanistan. We were not defeated by the Taliban; we decided to be defeated, and one way or another it was inevitable once that decision was confirmed by President Biden. I am aware, and I know you are all equally so, of all the promises that we had made that we were halfway through keeping that have now been broken. I and many others with many friends in Afghanistan still get daily heartrending requests for help, and "Why did we do it?" and all that sort of thing, so that is where I stand.

Nation building is a sine qua non of successful counter-insurgency. What would be totally morally bankrupt would be if you inflicted on a people a military campaign only and did not give them some reason to support you. Quite clearly, we see today that the vast majority of Afghans, who did not necessarily like some of the corrupt members of Government and all the things that we know were happening, would nevertheless prefer that to living under the Taliban.

Q232 **Alicia Kearns:** Rory, the same question to you, although I should probably declare that I have worked on a number of UK Government CSSF programmes over my time. We seem to be missing the piece that the UK Government spend a lot of time funding a great number of contractors doing very good work on the ground. Surely the intelligence that they were providing should have been giving us warning signs and better information about what was going on. Do you think that there was enough assessment of whether our building of institutions was the right sort of building of institutions? Were we focused on the right outcomes and impact, and why were we not getting better intelligence from those programmes on the ground?

Rory Stewart: Those are two separate questions. On the intelligence point, generally the problem with intelligence is whether there is a willing market, whether people really want to listen and whether people are motivated to listen. You are absolutely right: there will have been many people working on the ground, and that will have included soldiers, diplomats, many people working for non-profits and CSSF contractors, and indeed many Afghans who would have been perfectly capable of explaining the enormous problems that were happening. The question is: who wants to listen? Do Ministers want to listen? Do ambassadors want to listen? Do Prime Ministers want to listen? Does anybody really care? Do people in an embassy get promoted for talking about this stuff, or do they get promoted for happy-speak?

To take one example of this programming, as the DFID Minister I tried very hard to stop a £75 million Afghan national police training programme in 2017, and got into a huge fight with the ambassador. My argument was that there are many things that we can do in Afghanistan, but I can absolutely assure you that we have tried this police training programme again and again over the last 15 years. I have seen it fail again and again. I have seen the United States spend literally $12 billion on trying to train the Afghan national army and police doing this kind of stuff. We are not going to put another £70 million into this. This is crazy.

I was completely defeated by a system that did not really want to focus on the details and did not have much historical memory. The officials I was dealing with were not people who spoke Afghan languages; in fact, in my DFID team deciding this money there was nobody who had actually served in Afghanistan—certainly in the room when they were briefing me—but they were desperately trying to overrule the Minister, who actually did speak an Afghan language and had spent a number of years living in Afghanistan.

Why is that happening? It is because the system, to some extent, is not serious. It is decided in a kind of banal way that we have a problem with the police. Granted—there was a huge problem with the police. The police were useless and corrupt, and the lack of a functioning police force was a big problem in Afghanistan. But the naivety of the British Government is to assume that once you have identified the problem you have the solution, and the solution is, "Let's write another cheque and we'll sort out the police."

On the bigger issue, obviously there is a disagreement between me and Lord Richards about the question of a light footprint. There is probably no way of resolving it now, and I think historians will talk about this for the next 50 years. I will give my pitch, for what it is worth. It is a different pitch. My view is that actually the situation from 2001 to 2005 was better than we now acknowledge. Certainly, it was much better in the centre and north of the country. It was horrible in the south, but what we did to try to improve things in the south of Afghanistan actually ended up making them worse, because we created vacuums. We made sure that a lot of the tribal militia and warlords who had been allied with President Karzai then became our opponents and began co-operating with the Taliban. And ultimately we found ourselves in a situation in which we gave the Taliban the ability to say they were fighting for Islam and Afghanistan against a foreign military occupation.

I would have argued, although it would have been very difficult to say, that there is a limit to what we can do in south and eastern Afghanistan. We would have had to take a risk and of course the risk would have been that people who take the opposite view, like Lord Richards, would have said, "Well, actually, if we hadn't done those things, the Taliban would have grown anyway." That remains to be seen. But what we do know is that the estimates that SIS were producing in 2005 were that there was a maximum of 30,000 Taliban; in fact, they reckoned that there were about 3,500 active Taliban in 2005.

Over the next years, we killed an enormous number of people—tens of thousands—and we ended up with a situation where the estimates were that there were 70,000 Taliban. Still, what was the alternative strategy? I believe that the alternative strategy would have been to limit ourselves; accept that there were many things we couldn't actually do, however important they were, in nation building and governance; focus on success; invest much more heavily in areas such as Bamyan and Hazarajat, where huge advances were being made, and where people felt totally abandoned and betrayed; and ultimately accept that poor, fragile countries are poor and fragile. And our ambition should have been much lower. It should have been to say, "We want Afghanistan in 20 years' time to be slightly more prosperous, slightly more stable, slightly more humane", and not—unfortunately—to support the jargon of people like President Ghani, who was saying, "We're going to create a gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic, centralised state based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law."

Q233 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you. I have to say that your reflections on the civil

service are definitely ones that I would say are wholly accurate, the other issue being that civil servants have no expertise in institution-building, running these programmes or contracting the people who run the programmes, and that most programmes under £4 million do not even go to Ministers for approval, so the civil servants have complete rein to set the strategy themselves—but anyway.

Another question for you both is on Pakistan. It feels like Pakistan is trying to pull off quite the propaganda coup, seeking to present themselves as a kind of provider of a haven to refugees to help the West out and limit the fallout from the withdrawal, but obviously it was they who harboured the Taliban in Quetta for all those years. What has been the issue—I worry that it is going to fall back to the answer of happy-speak, possibly not inaccurately—or the problem with our policy in Pakistan leading up to the Afghan withdrawal, and what should our relationship be with Pakistan now, because it very much feels like we don't have one, but whatever we do have is almost a lovely, rose-tinted glasses thing that they are a great partner, and I am not convinced they are? I don't know who wants to start. Lord Richards?

Lord Richards: Well, I learned early on that if you want to understand Kabul and Afghanistan, you need to understand Islamabad, and if you want to understand Islamabad, you have to understand Delhi. So the first, slightly cheap riposte is that we don't now want a strategy for Afghanistan; we need one for the region, with perhaps Afghanistan at its core, and it has got to take into account Pakistan's legitimate concerns.

Essentially, at the end of the day Pakistan did not want to be surrounded by India or pro-Indian countries—i.e. Afghanistan—and it set out to ensure that didn't happen, and it has been successful. We knew that way back when I used to have quite a good relationship with President Musharraf, when I was based in Kabul.

So I think it is a bigger issue than just Pakistan, and what I would like to see now from the British Government is a revised strategy for Afghanistan that combines carrots and sticks to Pakistan and to India, because—believe me—they have inevitably been involved in Afghanistan, and not all of Pakistan's claims are fanciful, and vice versa. And Afghanistan under the Taliban has also got to be influenced—not necessarily persuaded, but influenced—through our engagement to conform with whatever that strategy's precepts are. That would be my overriding answer.

Pakistan hasn't always been that helpful, but it had a legitimate national interest in the outcome in Afghanistan. How it then went about it, I and you could find—on occasions—quite reprehensible, but that is a different issue.

Rory Stewart: Very quickly on Pakistan, obviously this is something that people got on to quite early. Bruce Riedel, who was a CIA analyst, produced a big report on Pakistan for the Obama Administration in 2008-09. Richard Holbrooke managed to become the presidential envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan and that started an attempt to try to get these

things called AfPak strategies going. Ultimately, they were a failure. Why were they a failure? Because, as General Richards has pointed out, Pakistan had reasons why they weren't going to close that border and why they were going to provide a safe haven for the Taliban in Quetta. Those ranged from India, to a basic sense that they didn't believe we were going to stay, so they were going to hedge their bets and make sure they had a route into the Taliban. They didn't particularly want to irritate a terrorist group on their territory. It suited them to appease them and it suited certain members of the Inter-Services Intelligence agency, who were themselves Islamist and deeply sympathetic to what the Taliban were doing.

What would it have taken to control that? Well, the US ended up in a mad situation. They had more leverage than we did—much more leverage. They were spending well over £1 billion a year. But they got themselves into a sort of protection racket, in which the more terrorists there were in Pakistan, the more it seemed necessary to give more money to try to prevent the problem from getting worse. Actually, both Afghan and Pakistan Governments were tempted to do this kind of thing. In other words, we were sort of encouraging instability, because the more instability there was, the more pressure there was to invest more and do more.

To get out of that, it would have been necessary to detach and step back and convince the Pakistanis that they had something to lose by supporting the Taliban. They were so good at saying, "No, no, no. If you fail to support us financially, mad mullahs will get their hands on nuclear weapons and we are all going to go to war with India," that nobody was ever prepared to take the risk.

Q234 **Royston Smith:** You have been so generous with your time and your answers, but I wanted to talk quickly about aid and influence. Is the Prime Minister right to worry that aid could be a blank cheque to the Taliban?

Lord Richards: No, partly because of winter's arrival and a pressing humanitarian need to look after millions of people who are in the predicament they are in because of our decisions. We seem to forget that; the Americans seem to forget it. This wasn't going to happen. By allowing the Taliban to succeed in Afghanistan, we have created this humanitarian situation. At the moment, I am very worried that we are not owning up to our responsibility to help resolve it.

My own view is that we now need to accept our defeat, which is what it is; we need to work with our eyes wide open with the Taliban—engage with them. The whole issue of recognition is, I think, a distraction at the moment. We need to engage with them, influence them through a combination of carrot and stick, as I said a minute ago, and preserve life in the short term, but influence into the longer term, and try to work with those Taliban who I think we should take at face value.

There are many who will tell you that they can't be taken at face value, but we have got to take a risk in this area to work with them, to lead them into being the sort of country that we have relations with, as with other countries that are very similar. People keep saying, "Human rights—we can't accept the way they approach girls and women's education" and all that sort of thing. That is true. But there are some optimistic signs. We need to encourage them.

I know, for example, of a very enterprising Muslim friend of mine, an ex-army officer, who is all ready to send a team of Deobandi priests—imams—into Afghanistan to work with their counterparts there, and so on and so forth. There are things we could be doing and should be doing, which we seem to be failing to do. One, there will be a humanitarian catastrophe this winter, which we are already seeing. Two, we will lose any opportunity to influence the Afghan Government of the future, which will be an opportunity seized by our competitors in the region.

I may not necessarily agree with the most pessimistic views of Russia, China and Iran, but, nevertheless, they will seize this opportunity. Why are we giving it away to them when, for want of a little bit of engagement and action, we could wrest back the initiative or at least have a good opportunity of doing so?

Rory Stewart: I agree 100% with everything that the general has just said, and I would add that I find the Prime Minister's statements on this deeply troubling and disturbing. The risk of what the UK and other countries are doing at the moment is that we are acting as though we are threatening to starve Afghans in the completely unrealistic belief that it will somehow give us leverage over the Taliban. What worries me is that when the Prime Minister is reluctant to provide proper development and humanitarian support, part of the problem is actually bitterness and embarrassment about the August evacuation. We are not looking at this clearly. We are now looking at a situation in Afghanistan whereby the country is collapsing rapidly and becoming one of the very poorest countries in the world. Twenty million people are now on the edge of starvation. You can see babies starving and people selling their children—it is the most horrifying situation.

It is perfectly possible, with a little bit of energy and imagination, to get far more support through UN agencies and NGOs on the ground. At a very small level, I am running a non-profit on the ground at the moment. Our clinic is open and we are seeing 27,000 patients. We have our primary schools open, we have our institute open and we have girls back, but what we are not getting is support from international donors, because there is a combination of mad ideas that somehow they will be able to blackmail the Taliban. They had leverage when they had troops on the ground, but they do not have leverage now. The Taliban are not like Russian oligarchs; they are not trying to go shopping in Harrods, so you cannot sanction them in that way. We know how to deliver development and humanitarian aid without having to go through the Taliban, but we must be practical.

Charities on the ground need to be able to pay tax. If they buy petrol at a petrol station, they need to pay sales tax. Our staff need to pay income tax. There are a million Afghan women working in the carpet industry who can sell their carpets to buyers in United States and keep their families alive, but to do that, they need to pay 2% export tax. At the moment, the British Government is so terrified about any of this money going to the Afghan Government, which of course collects that tax because it is a Taliban Government, that everybody is paralysed. This is immoral and impractical, and I'm afraid it shows an extreme, small-minded bitterness.

Lord Richards: May I add one other point? If you remember, we were discussing earlier why we went into Afghanistan. It was for a fundamentally selfish reason: to protect ourselves from another 9/11. If Afghanistan collapses in the way that we can now see is perfectly plausible, Afghanistan will become even more chaotic and less governed, and more easily exploited by extremist groups. So we have another very practical reason why we should not want that to happen, other than simply making sure that a people who we have pitched into this position do not suffer in the way that we all sadly anticipate.

Q235 **Royston Smith:** May I ask a question in the last 30 seconds? I know we are overrunning. Who do we give aid to? How do we get that support to the people who need it? The worry is that—you would know, Rory, because you have virtually written the book on this, with your experience in aid—if you do something that the Government should be doing, they can use their resources for something else that we would not want them to do, so how do we do that?

Rory Stewart: The first thing to understand is that the Afghan Government is going to be bankrupt anyway, so they will not have a lot of money to spend on weapons and stuff. Some 60% of their budget came from international donors—that is no longer going to come, whatever happens. They can barely pay to keep the electricity going, and a quarter of the hospitals and clinics have closed. There is money sitting—there is nearly $9 billion currently frozen in the United States. There is a whole World Bank mechanism called the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund. That money can be put into UN agencies such as UNICEF and WFP, and into Save the Children, which I think you mentioned. The same can go into smaller charities. There are thousands of people on the ground. Save the Children have been operating since 1976. Our charity has been there for 15 years, and we have hundreds of highly well-informed Afghan staff.

You do not need to pump the money through the Afghan Government. Some of the money that you give—we have to be honest—will be paid in tax to the Afghan Government, but it will not be giving such an enormous amount of money to the Afghan Government that it will allow them to launch some major weapons programme. This is a Government that is barely able to keep the most basic civil service salaries paid and needs some tax revenue in order to keep the lights on and the clinics going. Unless we want the country to collapse, we need to allow that to happen. Of course, that involves taking a little bit of risk, but it is not as much risk as people say. This is not blank cheques for the Taliban but developing

development and humanitarian aid with a Taliban Government that, at the moment, is trying to find ways to co-operate with us.

We also need to do the counter factual. If we don't do that, and we cut off all the support and Afghanistan literally collapses into horror, you will have a very, very paranoid, angry Taliban Government reaching out to some very unpleasant allies to try and keep themselves afloat. That was the basis of their relationship with Osama bin Laden in the '90s. We cut all the support from Afghanistan, so the relatively small amounts that bin Laden was able to give—a few tens of millions a year—gave him a completely disproportionate influence.

Q236 **Chair:** Thank you very much. On the point about going on a major weapons-buying spree, it is not exactly as though they need to. They are now one of the best armed countries in the world, frankly. So I am not sure that that should be the principal concern.

May I ask one last question to you both? We spoke a little bit about the evacuation and where various elements worked. What would you do now for those who are left behind? We hear of various different groups, some formerly in vetted units and some people who worked with us or our partners in different ways. What would you do now?

Lord Richards: My own view is that for those who are at genuine risk of their lives—I am thinking particularly of the army but the women judges are another obvious example—we owe them the opportunity to get out. Unless we engage with the Taliban, in the way we have just been discussing, I can't see that happening.

My only caveat is that I want Afghanistan to work and to succeed, post this situation. If we take out everyone who will help achieve that goal in the longer term, I think we are talking ourselves into another problem. There is a balance to be struck. I don't know who makes the choice—it has got to be done better than it has been done hitherto—but my dividing line is those who are at genuine risk of their lives, as a result of our engagement with them or from working with us. We have to work to get them out in the best way we can. That means influence over the Taliban, and we are not gaining any at the moment.

Rory Stewart: The Prime Minister announced the ACRS, which was a scheme to try to take out women judges, human rights activists, LGBTQ+ campaigners and others who were particularly vulnerable. The UK was supposed to take out 5,000 this year and then 20,000 over the next few years; the total was 20,000. Nothing has happened; frozen. We are now at the end of November and nothing has happened.

It is very easy at the moment to get some of those people out, if the British Government are serious about it. We have a window of opportunity. At the moment, the Taliban will allow those people to get on planes and there are commercial flights out of Kabul. You don't have to make these very dangerous crossings across the borders, because, as you know,

Pakistan, Iran and central Asia have closed the borders and you can't get through.

All that the British Government need to do is work with human rights organisations, such as the Open Society Foundations, which has a clear list of people who they believe are genuinely vulnerable—they have a lot of information on this—and agree to take them. It doesn't need to be huge numbers. It could be 5,000 people and we could do it in the next two months. You would issue them with visas, they would board a commercial flight—a PIA flight to Islamabad or a flight to Qatar—and they would come to the United Kingdom. What is holding us back?

We need to call the Prime Minister out on this. He said he was going to take 20,000 people. There are very, very vulnerable people—the female judges are a good example of this—who, if we don't get them out now, are likely to be at very serious risk in a few months' time. Let's do it, and we can.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. General Richards, thank you for your time, and Rory Stewart, thank you for your time. We are now going to pause for a moment as we go to another panel.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rudra Chaudhuri and Kori Schake.

Q237 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is an enormous privilege to have with us Rudra Chaudhuri, the director of Carnegie India—we are very grateful that you are here with us, Rudra—and, of course, Kori Schake, who is not only a very dear friend, but the director of foreign and defence policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

If you will forgive me, I will go straight into some questions, and I would be very grateful if we could try to whizz through them. You both have an enormous amount of knowledge, and we are trying to extract the nuggets that we are looking for.

How do you think that the withdrawal from Afghanistan affects the US relationships with the UK and other NATO allies? I will ask you first, Kori, and then I will come to you, Rudra, to ask about the relationship with India and Pakistan.

Kori Schake: It is deeply problematic, especially as the Biden Administration crowed that America is back and that the Trump treatment of allies was anomalous. Yet, as retired General Richards and Rory Stewart made clear in the last panel, allies did not feel consulted; they felt like they had fought alongside the United States for 20 years in Afghanistan, and that their security concerns were not taken into account. That will make it more difficult and more costly to put together coalitions of allies for the future.

Rudra Chaudhuri: I will just comment quickly on one question that you posed Kori. The only qualification is that, outside the outrage that we have seen with regards to the withdrawal, especially in the UK, the fact is that the UK and the US went ahead to sign up to AUKUS. The integrated review also depends very much on the partnership with the United States, so it seems to us from the outside that the relationship between principals remains pretty strong.

On the India part, obviously India was taken by surprise, and shocked, just like everybody else. The haphazard way in which the withdrawal worked out put Indian interests and lives in jeopardy, just like for every other country operating in Afghanistan. It is a rocky area between the two countries, there is no doubt about it. This is open testimony, so I will just say it, but there is a lot of anger in India about the way in which the Chief of the Defence Staff—I believe he still is Chief of the Defence Staff until the end of the month—went about the negotiations with the Taliban in Doha. Some of the comments that he made in public did not help in India, and I think a lot of the energy has been focused on him.

Chair: Thank you. Henry, do you want to come in?

Q238 **Henry Smith:** Thank you, Chair—sorry, you caught me unaware. Apologies for the delay. Do you think that the Taliban will be able to hold on to power in Afghanistan for long? Do they have the ability to provide state services beyond the basic control of their territory? Leading on from that, what is your assessment of the likelihood of civil war?

Kori Schake: I would defer to others on the likelihood of civil war, but it looks to me right now that the Taliban have very little ability to provide services. They are literally bankrupt. As Rory Stewart pointed out, unless we find ways to take care of the basic needs of Afghans, the Taliban certainly are not going to be able to do it. International donors will not be willing to provide assistance even through the UN or other non-governmental organisations unless we send a clear signal that we support them doing so.

The Taliban are in physical control of the cities, because of our abandonment, but they are being challenged in a number of areas. We have to be very careful that we do not fail to imagine that Afghanistan could be worse than it already is, and that we do not make policy choices that penalise Afghans for our unwillingness to see our policies through.

Q239 **Henry Smith:** Thank you. Following on from that, do you think that the issue that the Taliban are not necessarily united is a compounding factor? What would be your view of that, please?

Kori Schake: I am not at all surprised that the Taliban do not have a hierarchy that everyone is operating under, or that it is not as disciplined a force as we make it out to be. Didn't Napoleon say to his generals that they thought Wellington was a great general because he had defeated them, but that he was not. Because we allowed the Taliban to defeat us, we assume that they are more organised, more capable, than they actually are. They will really struggle with and fail at the challenges of

governance. They are likely to fail at the challenge of policing their territory. We think that, because we chose not to do it, others have the ability to do it. That is also not true.

Q240 **Henry Smith:** Thank you. Mr Chaudhuri, do you have any comments on that at all?

Rudra Chaudhuri: Yes. There is one way in which I could answer that question. Just the other day, I was talking to someone from the National Directorate of Security. He, luckily, had made his way out of Afghanistan, otherwise he would have been finished. His view was pretty clear: in all likelihood, the Taliban in one way or the other will manage to stay in Afghanistan in a disorganised and chaotic way over the next two to three years. He placed four criteria for me, which I thought were quite compelling.

The first one was about disunity within the Taliban. Yes, it is not organised and, as Kori said, there is no clear hierarchy. The Pakistanis have placed the Haqqanis inside Kabul, Kabul is divided into many quarters and we know for a fact that various leaders and commanders from the south and the east are up in arms. The point he made was that it is still working. Every single day that we think that the disunity is actually increasing outside of Afghanistan, his view was that the glue is getting stronger inside of Afghanistan. The riff-raff on the outside of the political leaders are more friendly towards the west. I was hearing Lord Richards talk about Taliban we can engage with. A lot of that Taliban is being edged out of the system. Many of them live in Doha and many of them will be living a quiet life in Kandahar.

The second point, quickly, is that I think ISKP is a very serious issue. For whatever reason, the western media, especially in the UK, Paris, Berlin and, certainly, in Washington DC, were just not taking it that seriously. The focus in the US seems to be very much on al-Qaeda. Kori has been in the system and will see this as a category A terrorist threat to the United States, but ISKP is not really there in the hierarchy, and they are growing. If we look at reports coming out of Kandahar, for instance, it is quite scary. It is also a challenge to the Taliban leadership.

The key point is what the national resistance will actually be up to. My own sense is that goodwilled people in different parts of the world, many in Tajikistan, some in London and Paris, some in parts of south Asia, are still disorganised. It will take them two to three years to get their political voice together, let alone any kind of support. There is no country at the moment that is willing to support the resistance financially or otherwise. That leaves us with the Taliban.

Q241 **Henry Smith:** Briefly, what sort of leverage do you think the international community has over the Taliban? With what little leverage it might have, how do you think it should be deployed?

Kori Schake: I don't think we have any leverage over the Taliban. When we abandoned Afghanistan, why is anyone going to help us accomplish what we want to accomplish? They are just not, because they are going to

live in a very dangerous country, and we have demonstrated that we are not willing to stand alongside them and create a different kind of Afghanistan.

I agree with the comment Rory Stewart made in the previous panel. We do not have any leverage and starving the people of Afghanistan is something the Taliban are perfectly willing to do. We can either be complicit in that or come up with a more creative approach to try to delegitimise the Taliban Government, by showing that the international community still cares about the people of Afghanistan, and is willing to circumvent the Taliban Government in order to help the people of Afghanistan.

Q242 **Henry Smith:** Thank you. Mr Chaudhuri, do you have any comments to add to that?

Rudra Chaudhuri: I will make two quick points. If you think about it in a statistical sense, and think about what leverage the UK had six or eight months ago, when you still had boots on the ground and negotiations were still up and running in Doha, I would have put it at about six and a half out of 10. Right now, you still have one out of 10. I wouldn't say that you don't have any leverage at all. The fact is that financial support, the freezing of assets etc, does matter to the Taliban. The fact that Anas Haqqani today is out giving media interviews and speaking to European special advisers, Germans, Dutch who have been in the country, is primarily because of that.

The second question is whether you should use humanitarian aid and assistance as leverage. There my answer would be, absolutely not. There is a crisis in Afghanistan: 90% of Afghans are touched by some category of hunger. The World Food Programme is a perfectly legitimate use for a very well connected, fairly efficient system inside Afghanistan that needs support. You have got international agencies on the ground that need the aid. I guess it comes back to the uncomfortable circle of whether you engage with the Taliban in order to deliver aid or not. I am afraid that, at some level, you are going to have to be practical and get around that circle.

Henry Smith: I am grateful to you both for your answers.

Q243 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you both for appearing today. I am interested in how you would characterise China's goals and how the Chinese interest in Afghanistan is falling out. How do you expect the relationship Beijing is pursuing with the Taliban to go forward?

Kori Schake: I do not think that China's interests in Afghanistan differ in particularly significant ways from their interests in other central Asian countries. That is, they want material resources; they want a legitimation of their domestic policies; and they want to drive up the cost to the US and other western countries of our failure. So I think all three of those things are things that are already coming to pass, but I think it is a mistake, particularly for the United States, which is leading the charge on organising countries to recognise the risks that China is posing for the

existing international order that has made our countries safe and prosperous. The United States needs to be especially careful not to turn Afghanistan into a problem about China, because that is deeply disrespectful to the people of Afghanistan and deeply disrespectful to countries like India that are going to bear the major strategic consequences of our abandonment of Afghanistan.

Rudra Chaudhuri: The one point of difference with Kori on central Asia and Afghanistan is that I would say that central Asia is still competitive geographically at this stage. The US has an arm in central Asia. India has an arm in central Asia. Russia has an arm in central Asia. There are a lot of other countries—Europe has arms in central Asia. In Afghanistan, it is just China. China may not be in the driving seat—I don't think it is—but it is in the car. It is very much in the car. Frankly, and I am not saying this because I am based in India right now, but Pakistan is in the driving seat. That car may crash down the line, but it does give China a certain amount of leverage.

On the broader point that Kori made, if I heard her correctly, the way China treats Afghanistan may not be very different to the way it is based in not only central Asia, but even in parts of Africa. I think it will be more capitalist. I think it will be about strategic corridors, locations, mining. If those interests dry up, it will be a problem for the Chinese calculus. This is not a long-term bet that the Chinese are placing inside of Afghanistan. China really only got into this game in 2015, 2016; they could get out of the game as fast. Their relationship with Pakistan is not impacted by what they do inside of Afghanistan.

Q244 **Alicia Kearns:** How do you think that the interests of Russia and China align in Afghanistan, or the opposite—fail to align?

Kori Schake: I don't think their interests align on China's mercantilist strategy, but I absolutely think they align on legitimating their domestic policies. In China's case, it is the horror of their repression of the Uyghur Chinese. They are looking to have validation from other countries for that and they are likely to get it from Afghanistan. There may be a price tag attached, but they are likely to get it.

Where Russia and China's interests align in Afghanistan is, first, on not allowing threats to emanate to their countries from Afghanistan and, secondly, on driving up the cost of our abandonment and our policy failures in Afghanistan. We should expect them to do that with enthusiasm and jubilation.

Rudra Chaudhuri: One of the key differences between Russia and China is that, based on where we are sitting right now, Russia will be a much more collaborative actor in dealing with Afghanistan. Recently, in Delhi, you had all the central Asian republics. You had Russia, the Iranian version of the national security adviser—all out in Delhi discussing the future of Afghanistan. What you will see with Russia is the need, not just the want, to integrate and to do more with Afghanistan's bordering nations, but also countries like India.

I think the second is very clear for Russia. I think a very clear red line has been drawn for the Taliban. If the Taliban is found supporting a whole bunch of non-state actors—the IMU and others—who are anti-Russian, I think the Russians will pull the plug. There is a point to which Russia does a kind of point scoring when it comes to the United States, but I think that that has passed. Right now, they are very keen on looking at what is happening, collaborating with us and containing the situation.

Q245 **Chair:** Before we come to Royston, is there an element that this is the dog that caught the car? Many of the countries that Alicia talked about—China, Pakistan, Russia and various others—have been undermining the western presence in Afghanistan for a long time. Have they had catastrophic success? Is this not what they truly intended?

Kori Schake: That may be true for Pakistan. I do not think it is true for Russia or China, because they were not major forces undermining our policy in Afghanistan. But the Taliban, excuse me, the Pakistani—what a Freudian slip!—Government were absolutely undermining what we were doing. They now face the potential for catastrophic success: namely, a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan that can delegitimise Government policies internal to Pakistan. That is a risk that the Pakistanis are running, but I will of course defer to Rudra for that.

Rudra Chaudhuri: On Pakistan, it is clear. If you take a step back, for years the Pakistanis have been saying that they want influence inside Afghanistan. I am not sure that this is the influence that they had intended, but this is what they got. It is a better option for them, at this point in time, than the alternative eight or nine months ago. Having said that, everybody in Pakistan today recognises that this will difficult.

Apart from the humanitarian crisis, there is disunity in the movement and fear around the ISKP and some horrific violent attacks that they have been engineering inside the country. The bet that Pakistan made was the United States and the UK would somehow work with Pakistan in the post-withdrawal period. We are seeing a lot of that; Tom West went down to Pakistan soon after he was given his designation. All that happened. But we are not seeing the kind of support that Pakistan expected out of the US, or Russia and China.

I do not think the Russians wanted this eventuality at all. They may have undermined western operations, supported parts of the Taliban and done all sorts of things over the last decade, but I do not think this is the eventuality that they want, because of the instability that it brings to central Asia, the humanitarian crisis and the fact that they are now in a place where they have to take responsibility.

Kori Schake: Can I pile on to that point, because it is hugely important? The Pakistanis now own what is happening in Afghanistan. There will be an enormous amount of schadenfreude in the US—"Hey this is what you guys wanted. You now own it. We aren't going to help you make it work." To an even greater degree than resistance to helping the Taliban Government,

there will be a huge resistance in the US to helping the Pakistanis make a success of this.

Q246 **Chair:** May I jump in on that? Clearly, I understand your point, but there is a follow-on danger: the United States did not enter Afghanistan in 2001 out of choice; they did so because they were forced into it, like the rest of the world. Is there not a danger that we will find ourselves back in the 1990s situation, where, having effectively destabilised one area of Afghanistan, we are not willing to look at any form of stability, because it looks like it is rewarding somebody else? The correct thing to do in the US or the UK interest, or indeed most interests, is that you may not like the Taliban Administration, but the alternative, which seems to be complete civil war, may punish Islamabad first. That is true, but it would punish all of us, too.

Kori Schake: It is sweet, Citizen Tugendhat, that you think American policy is rigorously interest driven. It is one of the reasons you are such a valuable friend to my country. But you should not underestimate our incapacity to learn the lessons of the last round of policy failure, and you also should not underestimate our ability to think that we have now built defences that are adequate to compensate for the lack of governance in Afghanistan, the lack of intelligence about what will be happening in Afghanistan, and all the other deficiencies that this policy creates.

Chair: Thank you for the title of "citizen". I am proud to be a subject of the Crown.

Q247 **Royston Smith:** We assume that Pakistan is influential with the Taliban, to whatever degree. Is it? If so, what should the UK do to engage with Pakistan directly? Is that possible?

Kori Schake: Rudra, why don't you start going first?

Rudra Chaudhuri: On Tom's point, what you may well see inside Afghanistan is a prolonged 1990s. This 1990s may survive for the next couple of decades. One senses that the only thing that will bring the United States and its allies back into Afghanistan is another 9/11, and not a 9/11 in Madrid, Paris or London, but one in the United States. That is the only condition that changes the calculus of that prolonged 1990s.

On the second part, the Pakistani influence on the Taliban is undoubtable. From a UK perspective, I suppose it would make sense to engage with the Pakistanis and to continue to strengthen the age-old relationship, especially between the militaries, if you want some influence indirectly. My only fear, as someone who sits in the region, is that this is exactly the kind of calculus that was made in the 1990s—that you start dealing with Afghanistan through Pakistan. Today, we are sitting in a Foreign Affairs Committee and saying that if you want some influence on humanitarian aid, or if you want safety for personnel working inside charities in Afghanistan, you go through Pakistan, but tomorrow you will be talking about routing the humanitarian aid via Islamabad or Rawalpindi. The day after tomorrow, you will go around saying, "Look, we've got an annual budget. We spend $40 billion a year on our defence. Maybe we should

spend a little bit of money on some kinds of civil structures inside Afghanistan," and you do it through Pakistan. That is when you make a prescription that can actually come alive.

It is not an easy one. If you are in the UK's position, it would make complete sense to engage with the Pakistanis, but you have to keep in mind that there is mission creep in that engagement as well, and it should not and ought not to lead to the kind of eventuality that we saw in 2001.

Kori Schake: I feel like the closing scenes of "Charlie Wilson's War" are being replayed here. We have abandoned Afghanistan and demonstrated to the Pakistanis that their calculus was correct that they could undercut our success and write us out, because eventually we would get tired of doing it. The only place where I may disagree with my colleague is that I do not think even an attack on American territory would precipitate a return to Afghanistan in the kind of operations that we have had in Afghanistan, namely a concern about building competent governance in the society. What we have done is delegitimise the only potentially successful strategy, which is nation building. What we will do in the aftermath of subsequent attacks is retaliate with military force in a way that does nothing to improve the capacity for governance in Afghanistan or help the people of Afghanistan to get to a better place than they are in now, where they are subject to the brutality of the Taliban and the influence of the Pakistanis.

Q248 **Royston Smith:** Do you have an opinion on what the UK should do to support Afghans who have crossed into Pakistan or Iran?

Rudra Chaudhuri: I think especially for Afghans who have worked closely with the British establishment, not just in military contracting but in various roles in the embassy, there is a duty on the United Kingdom to bring them to the UK. I can tell you first hand how difficult it has been even for deputy—*[Inaudible.]*—the Government, and I won't mention the Ministries, who have had a hell of a time getting into the UK. These are people who were promised safe passage on 15 and 16 August. They were given the word of senior British officials that, one way or the other, we will get them out, and it did not happen. There were other European countries that finally got them out to safe havens, and then they made their way to the UK. For the ones who are in Pakistan and Iran, I would say that there is certainly a duty, and there is a question of reputation. I think the British Government have said that they will take in 20,000 Afghans who have worked with them. I can only hope that that number increases and you are able to leverage the relationship that you have with Pakistan, which is considerable, in order to get these people into a safer harbour.

Kori Schake: I absolutely agree with that. Not only are we running a reputational risk by the incompetence and cruelty of our policy towards people who helped us try to achieve what we were trying to achieve, but we are also failing at the moral level and at the competence level. Not only should we take these people into our own countries, but we should be organising an international effort to take them many other places. We are not even bothering to do that. It is genuinely disgraceful what we are

doing, and it will make it much harder the next time we need help from people to accomplish what we are trying to do in the world.

Q249 **Chair:** Thank you very much. One of the takeaways for a lot of us in the United Kingdom was that after 20 years of sustained and extremely costly alliance with the United States, which I think—I speak for myself here, not for the Committee—was important for the United Kingdom, it was nevertheless a surprise the speed with which the White House changed its mind, and the limited nature of its consultation with all allies, but particularly with the UK. Do you think this is a pattern for the White House, going forward? Is this a new trend, or is this a one-off?

Kori Schake: First, I think that, absent allied complaints, it would be likely to be the pattern. I think the French Government see a pattern, because they see n is greater than 1. They had the lack of consultation not only over Afghanistan, but also over the AUKUS agreement that your Government, my Government and the Australians formed. But my sense is that Afghanistan may be unique. Perhaps I am too optimistic, which is my birthright as an American, but it does seem to me that Afghanistan was particular for President Biden. He always thought he was right, we should never have invested that much, and this was always going to be a priority for him. The chaos and the speed—the things that were wrong with our Afghan withdrawal—sit at the President's responsibility, not anyone else's. Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin came back from NATO meetings in the spring and advised the President that allies were really concerned about this and wanted a different policy. The President didn't care.

None the less, I do think the fact that allies were shocked and are saying from across the Atlantic, "The Biden Administration doesn't look any different from the Trump Administration," is getting traction, not just in the Administration but with the President himself, because he does want to be seen as different and better than the Administration that came before. Not only his foreign policy but his domestic policy relies on him being a different kind of president from President Trump. Allies have made clear that their interests have been damaged by America's lack of consultation and lack of interest in the consequences for allies. This matters not just in Europe, but in the US-India relationship, for example. The Biden Administration has grand ambitions for a deepening of the quad and for India becoming a major pillar in containing China, and that will not happen if they feel the United States is an unreliable ally, which is what countries are suspecting after the Biden Administration's choices on Afghanistan.

Q250 **Chair:** May I follow that up with a question for you, Rudra? A lot of allies around the world watched the events in Afghanistan in August, and within a matter of days, official Chinese news agencies were putting out op-eds that effectively called into question the US commitment to Taiwan and various other countries around the world. How do you think that was viewed by India, and what does it mean for the perception of US commitment to allies in the region? Clearly, Afghanistan is not Taiwan—the relationship and level of dependence are very different—but how was that viewed?

Rudra Chaudhuri: Thanks, Tom. I will also just take the earlier question very quickly. As Kori said, it was very clear that for this particular President—call it stubbornness or over-determination—Afghanistan had a particular imagination in his mind. He did not want to be hassled by the military tsars; he was very clear that this could be Vietnam all over again, because that is what you see from the outside, and that result. Is that going to be Joe Biden when it comes to the quad, the integrated review and the Indian portion of the Indo-Pacific? I don't think so. I think it is very clear that for this Administration, the east is where it matters, and for that they realise that, whether it is China, technology, quad or AUKUS, they will need their partners and friends. At some level, we have to disaggregate the policy-thinking process and the cerebral process in Afghanistan from the Indo-Pacific and larger interests.

On the second point, honestly, there is a lot of reportage on trust and credibility when it comes to the United States. My own view is that it is overblown and that, actually, outside of Afghanistan, US credibility on commitments on Taiwan, Korea, Japan, the Indo-Pacific and the quad is strengthening day by day; it is not being undermined. I cannot speak for officials in Delhi, but as an outsider and analyst, all I can say is that I do not think it has necessarily undermined the kind of credibility that New Delhi would place on the United States when it comes to what matters to the United States. I think that is what countries have figured out: it is not so much the question of trust or credibility; it is about saying, "We have got to figure out what matters to the United States and work with them where we can."

For India, it is very clear that in the western theatre, when it comes to Afghanistan-Pakistan, the UK and the US are not India's friends. They are not India's enemies, but they are not India's friends. You are not going to be sharing information and intelligence when it comes to growing support of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed inside Afghanistan, because of the access you need to Pakistan and other complexes. But in the eastern theatre, when it comes to the Indo-Pacific, for instance, I am pleased that India is putting its weight on the UK, the US, Australia, Japan and a range of other countries.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. You have both given us extremely protein-rich responses on these incredibly complex issues. I know many of us are concerned about many of these areas going forward. If you have further thoughts, we would be very grateful if you were to feel willing to jot them down and send them over. Thank you very much indeed, Rudra and Kori, for your time this afternoon and for the insights you have given us.