



Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan

Monday 28 September 2020

2.55 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Blackstone; Baroness Fall; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newham.

Evidence Session No. 5

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 37 - 46

Witnesses

I: Laurel Miller, Director, Asia Programme, International Crisis Group, and former acting US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan; James Dobbins, Senior Fellow and Distinguished Chair in Diplomacy and Security, Rand Corporation, and former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Laurel Miller and James Dobbins.

Q37 **The Chair:** Good afternoon. I welcome Laurel Miller, who is Director, Asia Programme, International Crisis Group, and former Acting US special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. I also welcome James Dobbins, Senior Fellow and Distinguished Chair in Diplomacy and Security, Rand Corporation, and former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thank you for joining us today to share your expertise as we continue to take public evidence for our inquiry: the UK and Afghanistan.

I remind Members and witnesses that the session is on the record, broadcast and transcribed. I also remind Members to declare any interests when they ask questions.

I shall as usual ask the first question, which will be rather wide in scope, but then turn to my colleagues, who will ask more detailed questions.

In your opinion, what was the primary motivation for the US Administration to enter into talks with the Taliban? Have the United States' national interests been met?

Laurel Miller: Thank you for inviting me to join you today. It is my honour and pleasure to be with you.

The reason the US began a full decade ago to explore the possibility of peace talks with the Taliban and talks among Afghans to end the war is that the US came to have grave doubts about the feasibility of bringing the war to a conclusion through military means. After the US invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, primarily for counterterrorism-related purposes, it became embroiled over the years in a counterinsurgency fight that it came to see as unwinnable.

The publicly articulated rationale—that there is no military solution to the war and therefore a negotiated political settlement should be explored—is, in my view, the real rationale for exploring the possibility of peace talks. You can also see that the more the US politically has become motivated to end its military involvement in Afghanistan, the more serious and concerted the efforts have been to try to get a peace process launched.

James Dobbins: Laurel is right that, when first this effort started 10 years ago, it was founded on the belief that a satisfactory military outcome was unlikely. For a decade or more, American officials have realised that winning the war was not feasible at any acceptable cost, which left the choices of either losing or not losing. For a decade, they have chosen not to lose, which means continuing to be committed to supporting the Afghan Government and population in defending themselves from the Taliban.

There is an alternative; it is an iffy alternative, and it is certainly not a high probability, but it is worth pursuing: a peace settlement. Again, we have pursued that for a decade.

The Trump Administration had to make some compromises to get the Taliban to the table. They are at the table now, and I would say that the opening round has been going as one would expect: they are focusing fairly constructively on procedures for their talks, and we will see.

The Chair: Thank you very much for helping to set the background for the remainder of our questions. I now turn to my colleagues and invite Baroness Fall to ask the next question.

Q38 **Baroness Fall:** Thank you very much for your time today.

I want to explore the link between withdrawal and the peace talks and ask why you think the White House decided to make an unconditional commitment to unilateral withdrawal of troops regardless of the result of the intra-Afghan negotiations.

Laurel Miller: I would not characterise the withdrawal commitment as entirely unconditional. However, in the brief text of the US-Taliban agreement—it is only four pages long—the conditionality is very loosely and ambiguously articulated. There is enough there in the text for the United States to argue, as its officials and diplomats do, that there is conditionality, but not so much that one can really put one's finger on what the conditions are. At the end of the day, it amounts to this: the US has reserved to itself the right to define the conditions as it goes along and determine whether those conditions have been satisfied.

The answer to why this is, if not unconditional, at least ambiguously conditional is that the US, I believe, saw acceding to the Taliban's number one demand in these negotiations as essential to getting their commitment to move forward with peace talks among Afghans. The concession was that the Taliban has long demanded a commitment from the US to a specific timetable for withdrawal. The Taliban has not said that must be entirely unconditional, but it has been quite insistent on a specific timetable, so I infer that US negotiators found that they could not get to the next stage of the peace process—the talks among Afghans—without conceding that to the Taliban.

The key condition that the US will focus on is whether the Taliban has met its assurances regarding counterterrorism in Afghanistan. Whether the US actually sticks it out long enough and slows the withdrawal process long enough to ensure that a peace process is concluded is a more open question, but I would note that, so far, since last February, not a single deadline specified in the agreement has been met, so there is reason to think that the end of April deadline for a complete withdrawal is not likely to be precisely met, either.

James Dobbins: I again agree with Laurel, as I almost always do.

President Trump has long made no secret of his desire to withdraw from Afghanistan. The negotiators were faced with a decision not of whether to agree to withdraw at a fixed date but whether to agree to a fixed date at some distance in the future or to see withdrawal immediately. They chose the former.

The date chosen is after the US election, so either winner will have a chance to reappraise this. I do not think the negotiations will have achieved anything substantial by then. They may have made some progress, but certainly peace will not be at hand. Again, they will be faced with the choice of losing or not losing. By losing, I mean withdrawing prematurely and seeing the whole structure that we have built collapse and a wider civil war occur, which I think almost all analysts believe would be the effect of a premature NATO and American withdrawal.

Q39 **The Chair:** Thank you very much. I understand that Baroness Blackstone, who was to ask the next question, is still in the Chamber, so excuse us; we are having our meeting at the same time as the House of Lords is sitting. I will ask the question in her place, if I may.

This is very topical, as you might imagine: what do you consider to be the main differences on policy towards Afghanistan between President Trump and Joe Biden?

Laurel Miller: Of course, we do not know precisely what, if there is one, the policy of a Biden Administration will be. Understandably, very little has been said in the context of the election campaign so far about Afghanistan because foreign policy simply does not loom large in the election and no candidate would want to box themselves in to a very specific position.

Vice-President Biden has said a few things in the electoral campaign: he has said that he wants to bring American troops home but has also spoken about potentially leaving some counterterrorism forces behind. That is a policy line that would have to be further explored if he won the election.

My sense, based on the little that has been said in the election and what Vice-President Biden's well-known views and positions were when he was serving in the Obama Administration, is that we would see a fair amount of continuity of direction in the policy. I think we would see some differences in the execution of the policy, and in particular—and this may be of interest to you—I would anticipate that a Biden Administration, which will likely prioritise restoring its commitment to allies and its appearance of commitment to allies and to NATO, would be somewhat more inclusive, co-operative and engaged with allies and partners regarding its plans in Afghanistan, so some differences in execution.

Most importantly, there is the question of the ambiguities that I mentioned in the US-Taliban deal and how they will be filled in. That leaves a fair amount of wiggle room, as we say, for determining the specifics of the direction, in particular the timing and the question of

whether the United States is going to claim that there are some specific conditions, even if they are not in the black and white of the text.

James Dobbins: I served with Vice-President Biden in the Obama Administration and attended a number of meetings with him and the President on this issue. He was always the dove in the dovecote pushing for an absolute minimum military commitment in Afghanistan, which he defined as a counterterrorism presence as opposed to a counterinsurgency presence. We are effectively down to that level now. We are either at or about to go to 4,400 troops, who will be predominantly counterterrorism-related, and of that number the combat troops will be entirely counterterrorism-related. His vision of half a decade ago has been fulfilled.

Where to go in office is uncertain, but, as Laurel indicated, he has given some indications, and I agree with Laurel that, whatever happens, you will not be surprised to read in the paper or on your Twitter account that we are leaving Afghanistan and then have that reversed a week later. There will be consultation. The consultation will be preceded and followed by consultation within the Administration. The President will listen to his advisers and it will be a methodical process, which we grew used to over 75 years or so until recently.

Q40 **Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** Thank you both for your very helpful answers so far.

What is your assessment of the prospects for the negotiations between the Afghan Government and the Taliban? I understand what you say about it taking quite a bit of time—that must be right—but what is the probability of the outcome?

What would be the key elements of a stable and durable Government of Afghanistan post a settlement, and in particular—and you have both referred to this—what would be said in any agreement about not supporting and not giving a haven to terrorism? Could those elements that you will put in your reply be anchored in some way in international law?

Laurel Miller: The probability of success in any peace process is low. I certainly would put the probability of a successful outcome here, meaning that the two parties come to some kind of final agreement, as rather low—something well below 50%. Although it is impossible to put a specific number to it, I think it is a high enough probability to try, because it would be the best result, but low enough that one has to be realistic about the prospects.

One reason it is particularly low is that this is a peace process that has been instigated predominantly through external pressure. This is not the parties themselves, because of the battlefield dynamics, appreciating that one or the other side is clearly going to lose or that there is an unresolvable stalemate and that therefore they need to come to terms. That is a circumstance in which you are always going to see throughout the process some rather severe constraints on the willingness of the two

sides to enter into compromises if they think they may still have military options available to them.

This is a peace process about 40 years of war, not about just the last 20 years of war, so it is quite complex, with more parties and constituencies involved than just the Afghan government as such and the Taliban. That adds, I think, to the challenges of the peace process.

Finally, we have to appreciate that any possibility of success means that this is going to take a substantial amount of time, so ensuring that there is enough patience, among not only the Afghan parties but the external powers that are the instigators and catalysts of the peace process, is going to be challenging to sustain.

The key elements are going to have to include some kinds of changes to the political system that introduce elements that will satisfy the Taliban's demand for a more Islamic system. The current Afghan Government takes the position that, "We already have an Islamic system. We are an Islamic republic. What is not Islamic enough about this? Islam is referenced in multiple ways and places in the constitution". The Taliban has not articulated what is not Islamic enough about the existing system and what changes it wants, but we have to anticipate that it will want some structural changes to the system to introduce roles for religious authorities.

Along with and related to that, there will have to be some redistribution of power and modification of the levers of power: what are those levers, as I first said, but who gets to exercise the levers of power? There will need to be some amalgamation of the security forces, the existing state forces and the Taliban forces. That will, I think, be quite difficult.

There will have to be enough of a statement of protection of rights and freedoms to reassure those who have gained over the last 20 years in this regard that they are not going to be losers in the new system and to reassure foreign donors that there will not be a complete reversal of the gains. I by no means imagine that there will not be some weakening of those rights and freedoms, just to be very straightforward about it.

Finally—this relates to your question about counterterrorism—there will have to be some elements of an agreement related not just to the system but to the composition of the government and their principles of foreign policy that will be reassuring, first and foremost, to Afghanistan's meddlesome neighbours, who will not want to see Afghanistan as a threat to themselves, lest they continue to meddle in Afghan affairs, but that will be reassuring to the international community, the United States, its allies and partners, with respect to counterterrorism.

I cannot imagine that it would go much further than the counterterrorism assurances that are already in the US-Taliban agreement, but it is possible that those could be reinforced in some fashion.

James Dobbins: Laurel and I have worked on these issues when in government and out, so, not surprisingly, I again agree with her analysis.

My own view is that the key element here is the commitment of the United States, its allies and partners to Afghanistan. If the US leaves before negotiations produce a result, they will never produce a result. If the US leaves after they produce a result but before that result is implemented, it will never be implemented. In both cases, the war will continue and widen.

I know that is a prescription that will be unwelcome in most capitals—they may not be thrilled—but the conditions in Afghanistan are not very favourable given its geographic location, its weakness, that it is surrounded by more powerful neighbours who have a history of interference, and the divided nature of its society. To support the steps that Laurel has outlined, it would have to be agreed and taken—not just agreed, but taken—and for a consolidated peace to be achieved it does require that continued commitment.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed, both of you, for such clear and challenging answers to that rather more detailed and difficult question, which we know we all have to try to grapple with.

Q41 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** In many respects, Laurel Miller has answered very helpfully some of the line of the question I was going to ask, so I will rephrase it slightly.

Our Foreign Office's written evidence to us highlighted the fundamentalist philosophy and political approach of the Taliban, which it said weakened the prospects for compromise. You have just given a very good explanation of why that is the case and of some of the motivations, external pressure and the role that it may wish to take.

Given what Mr Dobbins has said, may I ask my question about its motivations differently? How is the Taliban weighing what it would consider to be in the best interests of achieving its aims if the balance is between participating in talks—on which the best indication is that it would be 50:50, although that is probably far too optimistic given what Laurel Miller said—or carrying on conflict or instability in the state? How will the Taliban come to those conclusions about what best serves what it sees as its aims?

The Chair: Thank you. May I put it on the record on behalf of Baroness Blackstone that she has been trying to join this session? It is important that *Hansard* is aware that the Parliamentary Digital Service is trying to assist her. I know she will join us as soon as information technology permits.

James Dobbins: One can take what the Taliban has said—that it is ready to compromise and is not looking to dominate a government—or look to its historic behaviour, which suggests that it does intend to be the predominant influence in a government, even though it may not be its

sole occupant. Laurel, who has talked to the Taliban on several occasions, which I have not, may be able to shed further light on that.

As for how it will reach its decision, it seems to have pretty good command and control, an ability to build a consensus and its representatives are authoritative and deliver on what they promise to a reasonable degree, but it is under pressure from the ranks not to make major concessions, so I think it will have some difficulty—if and when negotiations reach a point where hard decisions are necessary, which may be some time off—in bringing its entire movement along with it.

Laurel Miller: The Taliban's motivation for entering into this peace process is that it can test the proposition that it is able to convert its military strength into political, we would like to say, influence, or it would probably say control of Afghanistan. It is a more favourable outcome for it to regain some substantial share of power in Afghanistan through negotiations rather than purely through military means, because if it achieves that through negotiations it also gains the opportunity for international legitimacy at the same time, which it desires.

I think that it is, at least at leadership level, conscious that a victory purely through military means, if it can even achieve that—it is not clear how easily it could achieve an outright military victory—would be, I would not say a pyrrhic victory, but, a less favourable outcome for it than a negotiated settlement.

At the same time, it is able to participate in these negotiations, tactically be at pains to show that it is doing so in good faith—and may actually be doing so in good faith; I am sure it is conscious of the tactical benefits of that—and at the same time not compromise its ability to pursue the military option, if it comes to that. This is why we see it rejecting the idea of an early ceasefire or a substantial reduction in violence, because doing that at an early stage might damage its ability to have a plan B in reserve, which is: go back to just fighting and stop the talking.

In that sense, it is in a somewhat favourable position as it enters into the talks. The challenge is that it does not have a well-defined political vision. This is not like an insurgency that has an established political wing with a political manifesto and clearly political demands. It has to develop that political vision and that more detailed set of political demands as it goes along in this process, while at the same time, as Jim Dobbins said, having to bring along its rank and file in a process of consensus.

It is, in some respects, the opposite of the position that the other side of the negotiations, the Afghan Republican government, comes with. That side comes with a fairly clear political vision but without the cohesion to be able clearly to negotiate and implement that political vision.

I have less concern about the Taliban's willingness and ability to implement whatever it commits to. Of more concern is its willingness and ability to commit to compromise positions.

Q42 **Lord Grocott:** Thank you very much for your evidence so far. We have had quite a bit of evidence, as you will not be surprised to hear, about the involvement of the UK and the USA in Afghanistan. The question that I am putting relates to the involvement of other countries. I noted with interest in an article that Laurel Miller wrote that she referred to Afghanistan's "interfering neighbours"—a phrase that resonated.

The specific neighbours and others that I would like you please to comment on are Pakistan, India, the Gulf states, China and Russia, but if I have omitted countries that are significant please feel free to add them to the list.

James Dobbins: Let me start with Russia, and Afghanistan's neighbours. These states have been supportive of the peace process and have in some instances helped move it along; China, Russia and Pakistan nudged it in the right direction on several occasions over the last few years as we were moving towards negotiations. They all support a negotiated outcome. However, several of them hedged their bets by supporting the Taliban; in the case of Iran and Russia, fairly minimally—they are not backing the Taliban in the hope that it will win but as a way of hedging their bets and buying a bit of influence. Pakistan has given more substantial support over a much longer period. However, all favour a negotiated outcome and have not been problematic from that point yet.

India, which is otherwise more favourable to the US and Western positions than some of these countries, is not favourably disposed to the negotiations and particularly opposes aspects that would remove US troops from Afghanistan, but I do not think it has any intention of replacing the US in that capacity; it simply regrets that it might lead to further fragmentation in Afghanistan, further disorder and greater Pakistani influence.

The Gulf states also support the negotiations, but they too hedge their bets; they have not interfered with Taliban fundraising in their states, despite a decade of US efforts to persuade them.

On balance, the situation on negotiating tactics is mildly favourable. Implementation of an agreement will be harder and less easy to predict. If the situation begins to deteriorate, it is likely that the neighbours will back different claimants for power. Pakistan will back the Taliban. Russia, India and Iran may back other factions; they may back other factions and the Taliban at the same time in order to retain a foot in each camp and get some credit from whoever wins, so we will be back in a situation in which the regional environment is conducive to civil war.

Laurel Miller: I fully agree with all those points, but maybe I can add a couple of others.

Many people have wondered whether it is genuinely true that Pakistan has been as supportive and helpful in the peace process as US officials have been claiming. That is an interesting point that tells us something about how it might behave in the future. It is not surprising to me that it has been genuinely helpful in pushing along this peace process in the last

couple of years because it now sees the US doing exactly what it has told the US should be done for the last 20 years. From the very beginning of the US engagement in Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban, Pakistani officials have said to US officials that the Taliban needs to be incorporated in the government of Afghanistan. They have never been on board with a policy of simply eliminating the Taliban and themselves being in an adversarial position to the Taliban. They have found compelling the change in American policy over the last two years to be more focused on the peace process because it accords with their interests and their long-standing position. As long as US policy persists in that direction, I would expect them to be helpful, because it accords with their interests. If there is a change in direction, the peace process collapses and the US decides to revert to simply backing the existing Afghan government, I would expect the US and Pakistan to be more at odds again.

Many of the countries that you mentioned have had a very conflictual attitude towards the US presence in Afghanistan. Countries including China, Russia, and Iran, in particular, have all had the position that they do not want the US to leave too quickly from Afghanistan because they recognise the instability that would ensue, but they do not want the US to stay for ever in Afghanistan.

That reality is going to have to be borne in mind if the peace process collapses and the US and NATO decide to stay in Afghanistan for the indefinite future. There is a lot of room for friction to grow between the US and NATO and these powerful regional countries because they will increasingly find it antithetical to their interests to have the US sitting in Afghanistan for ever with no prospect of a peace process.

Q43 Lord Reid of Cardowan: I thank our witnesses.

I will not pursue the previous answer—the characterisation of China and Russia as almost Augustinian in their attitude towards the United States: “Lord, make them leave, but not just yet”—but it was fascinating.

May I return you, please, to domestic Afghan politics and ask what is your assessment of the internal stability of the Government in Kabul, particularly regarding the agreement between President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah? To what extent does that provide a basis for the resolution of ongoing tensions between them, and do you believe there is a need for revisions to the Afghan constitution?

James Dobbins: For the time being, they have achieved a consolidated position on the negotiations, but the negotiations have not required any difficult decisions. I think that, as long as negotiations continue and as long as they do not pose fundamental issues to the interest of the main Afghan parties, that consensus—that coalition—will hold. If the negotiations end, the basis for the current division, in which Abdullah Abdullah is supposed to lead the negotiating effort, or at least lead the Government’s process of formulating their position on the negotiating effort, will disappear and some new division of responsibilities will be necessary if the breach is not to become irreparable.

I personally participated in bringing the government back together after the elections in 2014, and Zal Khalilzad and the American Secretary of State had to do it again this year. I anticipate that that will continue to be necessary. The conditional promise of substantial American and European assistance is an essential component of the leverage that we have to sustain a coherent Afghan government who can execute the programmes and policies that we support. That is why I have argued, as I have today, that leaving before a peace settlement was achieved and implemented would lead to a fragmentation of the society in which the battle between the Afghan government and the Taliban would be joined by similar conflicts within the current Afghan government.

Laurel Miller: The self-defeating political behaviour that we see in Kabul is rather tragic, in my view. Their greatest defence—defence, literally, I mean—would be their political cohesion and their ability to act in a cohesive fashion, not only in the negotiations but in the governance of Afghanistan. This has been a chronic problem.

It is exacerbated by the constitutional structure, which is a winner-take-all, extraordinarily centralised system of presidential governance, where the President appoints not only a large portion of the parliament but every governor, every district governor and every chief of police, as well as senior positions within the administrative structure and the executive branch.

Unfortunately, even though most outside, foreign analysts of Afghanistan see and argue the need for some constitutional change -- because they see the mapping of this highly centralised winner-take-all system on to a patronage-based political culture and at the same time a diverse society with fractures between different groups as being incompatible and prone to the problems that we see internally in Kabul and in the context of the wars that they have had, even before the US invasion -- that view is not shared by the predominance of Afghan political figures, who prefer to compete for that winner-take-all position rather than change the structure of the government. There is a more granular level of detail that one could get into about which groups support what, and some groups would support some change to the system, but among the political class there is not majority support for the changes that would reduce the degree of centralisation in the system.

I would project that, even in the context of a successful political settlement, we would continue to see a rather highly centralised system that would be prone to the instability that we have seen. I do not expect the Taliban to be any less susceptible to the incentives of the patronage-based political culture than the existing government actors are.

James Dobbins: May I add a point because I did not answer a part of Lord Reid's question?

The Chair: Thank you. I was just about to come back to you, James; I was not going to leave you out. If you would like to continue, please do

so.

James Dobbins: Thank you. I did not answer his question about the constitution.

There is, I think, a perception on the part of some that the current constitutional arrangements were a function of Western or American decisions or preferences. My experience is that that is not the case. I represented the US at Bonn, where the first steps towards constituting a new regime were taken, and the Afghans themselves were very insistent on a unitary government and a strong executive. Their view was that only that could hold the country together; otherwise, it was better to split it into regions with strong men and, ultimately, wider conflict. That was also the view taken in the constitutional election by the Afghans themselves.

I think you have to say that, to an extent, they have succeeded—the country has held together—and there seems to be significant progress across a wide spectrum of criteria but with the external support that helps to overcome the periodic blockages when elections throw up ambiguous results.

I do not see this situation changing, and I do not think it makes much difference whether the United States favours constitutional revision. As Laurel said, there are some who favour constitutional revision. Many of the Northern Alliance and non-Pashtun elements would prefer a parliamentary system, which might avoid electoral crises but prove less competent in governing the country.

In any case, if the negotiations succeed, there will be a new constitution; there is no doubt. The negotiations will not be on the basis of the continuity of the existing constitution.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We are now approaching the last question on the formal list, but before I call Baroness Smith to put that question I note that there will be time for supplementary questions. I will prioritise colleagues who did not have a question on the formal list.

Q44 **Baroness Smith of Newnham:** I thank both witnesses for fascinating presentations and answers to the questions so far, particularly on the constitutional side of things.

One other quasi-constitutional question, I guess, is the state of the military and civilian forces. How far would they need support if there is complete withdrawal by the US and NATO? How best can that be delivered?

James Dobbins: I think we are nearing the minimum necessary. We are going down to 4,400 American troops and a slightly larger number overall of other NATO and coalition forces.

The issue is often posed about whether you have a counterterrorist or counterinsurgency presence, and if by counterinsurgency presence you

mean Western forces that do counterinsurgency—that go out on sweep operations—we have long since passed that point; no Western forces are conducting counterinsurgency operations.

You cannot conduct a successful counterterrorism campaign—a campaign directed against al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and other multinational terrorist groups that operate in Afghanistan—in the absence of someone doing counterinsurgency. “Someone” is the Afghan government and the Afghan forces. They require, and will require indefinitely, some level of Western support. This should not be surprising. Afghanistan is a poor state; it is a land-locked state; and it has been dependent on some form of external support for hundreds of years. This is not an unusual situation for Afghanistan.

Further, one could argue that it could survive for a period with monetary support but no actual western military on the ground. After Soviet forces left, the Soviet puppet government survived for several years as a result of funding from Moscow. It was only when the Soviet Union collapsed and the funding dried up that the government collapsed, but it was losing ground.

Contrary to the Soviet practice, I do not think Western governments will be prepared to provide assistance at current levels if their forces are not engaged. It is simply that, if you do not have forces engaged, the problem is not serious enough to require assistance at the levels that are currently required. There is a “support the troops” element to the support that is important. Further, even if you were in principle willing to do it, who would oversee the execution of the assistance to ensure that it was going to the right ends?

Further, I think the Afghan armed forces still need some degree of advice and support in more complex, higher-end tasks such as logistics and planning that Western military can provide.

I think, as I said, we are nearing the point at which further reductions will degrade the Afghans’ performance to the degree that they may begin losing more quickly, and that may affect the negotiations negatively.

Laurel Miller: On the forward-looking part of your question, if the peace process succeeds and there is a negotiated settlement between the Afghanistan Government side and the Taliban, it is quite questionable in my mind whether the resultant government would actually accept foreign security assistance if that entailed having foreign military forces—uniformed forces—of any kind on the ground. I do not see a government of which the Taliban is a considerable part openly agreeing to that. They might say, “Give us some money”, but, as Jim noted, we do not tend to send a cheque for security assistance.

If there was a way to deliver training and professionalisation assistance purely with civilian contractors or other civilian elements, there might be some possibility to it.

If the peace process fails, and the US and NATO decide to withdraw but continue in some fashion to support the Afghan government, I see no feasibility to any significant assistance for the security forces for the reasons that Jim outlined; you cannot do that from a distance. I would see some civilian assistance and certainly humanitarian assistance continuing, but without foreign forces on the ground I do not see any security assistance.

If part of your question was, "What are the capabilities today of the Afghan forces and how are they doing?", I think it is true, as you will hear from US officials, including military officials, that their capabilities in a technical sense have improved over time and that Afghan forces, especially the most capable forces—the special operations forces—are able to act increasingly independently.

The fact remains that over the last several years, as the numbers of US and NATO forces have dwindled, the Afghan government have lost territory. That is partly because of some of the natural advantages of an insurgency, as opposed to a counterinsurgency, and, yes, it is true that it is because the Taliban has continued to enjoy support and safe haven from Pakistan, which is a large advantage, but the extent of support that it has received, whatever precisely it is, is surely much less than the enormous support—that financial, material and military kinetic support—that the Afghan government forces have received from the United States.

I do think that if the US withdrew and we saw the kind of wider civil war that Jim referenced earlier, which I agree is what would occur, that does not mean that the Taliban is in a position simply to roll through all the cities of the country and hold them. It has not been tested to that extent. But I do think you would see, at a minimum, the gradual erosion of the Afghan's government's capabilities given the trajectories that we have seen heretofore.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We do have time to squeeze in two supplementary questions. I ask Lord Alton and Baroness Helic to ask them together.

Q45 Lord Alton of Liverpool: I thank our two witnesses for their perceptive remarks, which have been very interesting indeed.

Sometimes we are asked to think about the parallel with our own peace process in Northern Ireland, but, as Lord Reid knows perhaps better than any of us, there was a genuine renunciation of violence in Northern Ireland. Calling this a peace process when it just seems to be a deal strikes me as slightly strange. There is no mediator and there does not seem to have been any shift in the Taliban's ideology, whereas there was a shift in ideology in Northern Ireland and there was a renunciation of violence. Yes, no one can win, and that was certainly a prerequisite of making progress, but, Laurel, particularly, how do you see that parallel, and will there be a shift, even if there is just some normalisation? Is there scope within the Taliban, factionalised though it is, to make real civil process?

Q46 **Baroness Helic:** I thank our two witnesses very much.

I want to ask about the NATO alliance and transatlantic relations in this new era of policy towards Afghanistan.

In essence, we went in together and fought together, yet we are not negotiating together and we are not leaving together. What does Afghanistan say about the future of NATO, about the future of transatlantic unity and about the way this Administration view it?

Laurel Miller: Taking the second question first, briefly, I think it is quite unfortunate how the current Administration have engaged with NATO. Yes, US officials have gone to Brussels and had conversations, but my understanding is that there has been nothing in the order of magnitude that one would consider true consultations and engagement with NATO. Frankly, I think the US is simply taking it for granted that NATO will follow whatever the US decides, and in fact the simple fact that in the US-Taliban agreement the US purported to be speaking not only for itself but for NATO was rather presumptuous, in my view.

I have also seen that the NATO Allies have gone along with this and have not objected particularly loudly. To me, that suggests it is because there is a desire to find a way out of Afghanistan, so probably most Allies are happy to follow along in the US wake if they can make something positive happen with the peace process.

On the parallel with Northern Ireland, I hesitate to try to draw analogies between either the process or the substance of one peace-negotiating context and another. There are always going to be more differences than there are similarities. It does not mean that there are not lessons to learn and ideas that can be drawn from one process and applied to another, but, again, if you try to draw direct parallels, I think you are going to find many more contextual differences than similarities.

It is not a peace process yet. The US-Taliban deal was not a peace deal. It was a deal about the conditions, although ambiguously specified, for a US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. It did open the door to a peace process in that it committed the Taliban to engage in a peace process with Afghans, but there will be no peace in Afghanistan as a result of implementation of the US-Taliban deal.

There will be peace only if there is a successful negotiation among Afghans, and, as I said earlier, I think that will take a very long time, in part for the reasons you identified. We are not talking about months, but a year would be fast in this context because it is not yet clear what the Taliban would require in exchange for a renunciation of violence. It is not yet clear exactly what scope there is for evolution of Taliban principles into actual negotiating positions and from there into actual compromises.

To some extent, this is true on the other side as well. I am highlighting the Taliban only because, as I said, its political vision is much vaguer than on the other side, but these positions are going to have to evolve as

they come in contact with each other, and that simply has not happened yet.

James Dobbins: On the Northern Ireland point, I think the primary reason that the Northern Ireland negotiation succeeded is that all the external parties—the UK, Ireland, the United States and virtually everyone else—supported the process, did not support the insurgency and were prepared to put considerable political capital into the mediation process. As we have explored here, the situation surrounding Afghanistan was somewhat less favourable and I would say that is the biggest difference, among many.

I could not be more disappointed and more distressed at the Trump Administration's treatment of NATO and more impressed with the patience and resolution that European governments have shown in not being thrown by this abusive behaviour.

I do not think it is right to say we are not leaving together. I think the Europeans will leave if the US leaves. That would be unfortunate on both scores. I believe that, from all indications, they will stay if we stay, which I hope will be the case.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. On behalf of the Committee, I thank you both for letting us have the benefit of the breadth and depth of your experience; it is very much appreciated, as you heard from my colleagues when they asked their questions.

James Dobbins: It was a pleasure and a privilege.

Laurel Miller: It was a pleasure.