

## Remarks by Ambassador Richard G. Olson

### **“Afghanistan: The Reconciliation Option”** **Stimson Center, Washington, D.C., April 4, 2017** *(Remarks as prepared, not as delivered)*

Commentary on the war in Afghanistan has become a counsel of despair. Labelling it the “forever war,” the “never ending war” and the “forgotten war,” pundits have narrowed our policy choices to the unacceptable (cutting our losses and allowing terrorists to claim the ungoverned space) and the marginally less acceptable (a long war in which some level of foreign troops buck up the Afghan regime for a generation). General Nicholson’s recent call for a modest troop increase to prevent a deteriorating stalemate has generated another discussion about troop levels – to the extent it has generated any discussion at all -- rather than a review of our broad objectives and how to achieve them.

I would like to take a step back and look at what our options in Afghanistan truly are and where we are headed over the longer term. It seems to me that there are in principle four broad courses of action available to us. Two are extremely unrealistic, and two are plausible as policy.

- First option: we could in principle, cut our losses, withdraw our forces entirely from Afghanistan, continue to prop up the Afghan government with civilian and some security assistance, and live with the consequences. This approach, while undoubtedly popular with some elements of a war weary populace, would ignore the lessons of history and replay the events of 1989 when the US withdrew its interest from the region at the end of the Soviet occupation, from which we can draw a direct line to 9/11. Such policy would almost certainly result in the re-emergence of ungoverned spaces and the resurgence of Al Qaeda, Daesh, and the unholy stew of other militants. While in principle we could continue to provide assistance to the Government, this cynical ex-FSO believes that our money tends to follow our troops and when our troops leave, the money goes too, despite the valiant efforts of Secretary Mattis to preserve funding for diplomacy. This policy of cutting our losses is a very bad option; were we to pursue it, we would almost certainly have to go back again under less favorable circumstances.
- Second option: we could, in principle, surge our forces, presumably this time without the constraint of artificial timelines. In theory, this would allow us to

truly defeat our enemies, or at least convince them they cannot wait us out. However, we would still face the problem Taliban safehavens in Pakistan. Counterinsurgency theorists tell us that the record of defeating insurgencies that have the advantage of a foreign safehaven is grim. And as someone with considerable personal experience on this score, I think convincing Pakistan to effect a strategic shift is wishful thinking. And please remember that Pakistan controls our Air Lines of Communication into Afghanistan, so ultimately, military leverage flows to their advantage. Finally, this is not my area of expertise, but I don't think the American people are particularly keen on another large scale adventure in Afghanistan. No one is actually proposing this course of action, so it is purely theoretical option.

- Third option: This option would have us maintain a garrison presence in Afghanistan, conducting counterterrorism operations and the Train, Advise and Assist mission for the foreseeable future. We would continue to harden the Afghan state and especially the Afghan defense and security forces. Given the scale of this project, it would entail decades. In other words, this is a long war; a generational commitment of some modest level of troops and robust assistance. It is, apparently, the policy course we are on, although I'm not sure that choice has been articulated to the American people. I am personally somewhat skeptical about the ability of our democracy to maintain an open-ended military commitment in such a challenging environment. And when we face a serious military challenge in other areas, I suspect DoD will be under pressure to reduce its commitments in land-locked country Central Asia. But as a policy, this option is plausible and coherent.
- Fourth Option: Pursue a political settlement. That is encourage the Afghan Government and Taliban to settle their longstanding differences in a manner that is acceptable to the US and the International Community, while continuing to support the Afghan state.

You might have guessed by now that I am a proponent of the fourth option, so let me make the strategic case for reconciliation.

The case begins with the premise that we, as the United States, have no fundamental quarrel with the Taliban. We took military action against the regime beginning in October of 2001 because it was allowing its territory to be used by Al Qaeda. Much as we disliked the Taliban regime of the 90s, it never threatened us directly, nor did it seek

to impose its medieval vision outside of Afghanistan. To engage in counterfactual analysis, had the Taliban handed over Usama bin Ladin, it's safe to say that there would have been no need for a war.

Of course there has been a war that has lasted 16 years. But fundamentally, the core issue remains the same: whether Taliban controlled territory would be used by terrorists to launch attacks against the homeland. There have been indications – not more than hints really – over the years that the Taliban might be prepared to abandon its relationship with Al Qaeda in return for some measure of international respectability. This alone offers a basis for serious discussion. If the international community could get solid arrangements (going well beyond mere assurances) that Afghanistan's territory would not be used as a base against us, surely that would remove the principal need for a continuing troop presence and for the international element of the conflict.

Secondly, there is the regional dimension. My belief is that, at its core, the conflict in Afghanistan is a civil war, driven by internal conflicts. While official Washington dates the beginning of Afghan troubles to the December 1979 Soviet Invasion, in fact, the USSR's intervention – a criminally stupid one that partially led to its own demise – was to involve itself in an ongoing civil war that had been underway for some time in response to the Saur revolution of April 1978. In my view, the nearly 4 decade long Afghan conflict is fundamentally one between rural traditionalists and modern urbanizers. Tensions between these sectors has been a factor in Afghan life since at least the rule of Shah Amunallah in the 1920s. Arguably, it is a historic dynamic throughout the Islamic world, since, as Professor Barfield reminds us it was first described by Ibn Khaldun in 14<sup>th</sup> century and his model still works for Afghan society.

But despite the fundamentally domestic nature of the dispute, the conflict has been prolonged and exacerbated by outsiders. Most prominent, but hardly alone, has been Pakistan, which nurtured the Taliban in the early 90s, supported their regime after 1996, and has given them sanctuary for the past 16 years. We could spend hours on this aspect of the conflict but suffice to say that despite heavy US pressure, and significant blandishments, Pakistan has never abandoned the policy of countenancing the Taliban's use of its territory against its western neighbor. I am convinced, from bitter personal experience that they will not abandon the Taliban, because for the Pakistani Establishment, Afghanistan policy is about geostrategic maneuvering against India. And since the Establishment's views India as the existential threat, all measures against the eastern neighbor are acceptable.

To me this is the fundamental reason for pursuing a policy of reconciliation. That the Taliban is backed by a nuclear weapons state is an exceedingly unpleasant fact, but like all unpleasant facts, one that needs to be factored into our policy. We cannot wish it away. Another unpleasant fact: our war in Afghanistan is entirely supported by an air bridge over Pakistani territory, and to some extent by ground supply through Pakistan. We can't supply our troops through Iran; I doubt we can supply them through the Russian dominated North given the state of our relationship with Russia. So, even if we take away the nuclear issue, the leverage flows toward Pakistan. This means that any "long war" policy of is, as the Israelis would say, simply "mowing the grass" i.e., a conflict of attrition against a virtually inexhaustible supply of recruits.

While Pakistan's behavior is in a class of its own for cynicism, it is not unique. Iran and Russia have played an unhelpful role, and their interventions are increasing. When Mullah Mansour was killed outside Quetta, he was traveling from Iran. The Iranians have admitted to contact with the Taliban. Secretary Mattis pointed out last week that the Russians are supporting the Taliban, a trend that has been underway for some time (when I was SRAP I raised this with my Russian counterpart in Moscow, not to any great effect). While there are no doubt many sources of Russian conduct, a key element is that they, and the Iranians, do not believe in American staying power. They look at our somewhat precarious geo-strategic situation and assume, like the Taliban, that they can wait us out. Moreover, has seen the logic of the situation and appears to be pushing its own political efforts. In December, it hosted a meeting in Moscow, purposely excluding the US, to discuss reconciliation. While this is no doubt reflects some pique at having been "excluded" (in Moscow's view) the Quadrilateral process, and a reflection of overall gamesmanship with the US, we should recognize that the region is likely to see a negotiated political settlement as a superior option and will back whoever seems to be succeeding in that arena. This is an area where American leadership would make a difference, and the absence of American leadership will lead to a deterioration of our position.

Let me briefly address the military situation, which General Nicholson has characterized as heading toward stalemate absent increased force levels. And the recent fall of Sangin suggests that, at a minimum, this will be another tough fighting season ahead. I support General Nicholson's call for more troops, for reasons I will get into later, but I believe, again because of the safehavens, that some form of military stalemate is inevitable. And it is worth remembering that the Taliban as a primarily rural group, will perceive themselves to be winning if they hold broad swathes of countryside, as they increasingly do. The Afghan government holds the cities and

population centers, but there is an asymmetry between how each side sees its relative strength.

Finally, it is necessary to mention Daesh, ISIL or ISIS, whatever you want to call it. The genesis of Daesh in Afghanistan is from the remnants of the Pakistani Taliban that were pushed out of FATA during operation Zarb-e-Azb, and broke away from allegiance to the Afghan Taliban for what they perceived to be a betrayal by the Afghan Taliban (who did not go to war against Pakistan when Waziristan was cleared). The emergence of Daesh further complicates an already messy military and political situation, but it may over time increase pressure on the Taliban. The Taliban have fought Daesh, and may face further pressure from their enclaves.

So, that is my argument for a political settlement. The question is what would a reconciliation process look like?

The first step is one that has already been rehearsed a few times. A Taliban office should be opened, most likely in Doha, Qatar in return for a publicly acknowledged peace process with the Afghan and U.S. Governments. We came close to achieving this outcome in the summer of 2013, but the Taliban overreached by hoisting their flag and putting up signage labelling the office as representing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Karzai and US Governments rightly rejected these symbolic trappings of an Embassy and the deal collapsed. All parties, including the Qataris, have every incentive to avoid a repeat of this debacle, which suggests that the deal might be resurrected if there were active American diplomacy on this issue.

A more subtle challenge, at least for the Obama Administration, was the view that after the conclusion of the combat operations in 2014, we were not legally a party to the conflict. This position would seem to fly in the face of the reality of our military involvement in Afghanistan, and naturally the Taliban see it as a subterfuge.

There is no need to buy the Taliban argument that the issue of foreign troop withdrawals needs to be resolved before moving to domestic issues – that would remove the Afghan government’s principal point of leverage. But the US does need to accept that it is a party to the conflict. In my view, it needs to at least be prepared to discuss the possibility of troop withdrawals, in a phased manner that allows for confidence building measures to proceed. In view of the emergence of Daesh, I think it is not impossible that the Taliban might eventually accept some residual US military presence. Certainly, any discussion of withdrawal would need to be very carefully calibrated and coordinated with our Afghan allies.

The core of the process, however, needs to be among Afghans about their political settlement. This portion must truly be Afghan led and Afghan owned. The Afghan Government, with the support of the US and international community has laid out three end-conditions that must be met: cessation of violence; a break with Al Qaeda and other international terrorist groups; and acceptance of the Afghan Constitution including its provisions with regard to minorities and women. These are, in effect, redlines, but they leave ample space for negotiation. The key problem here is that we do not know what the Taliban really want. When I was US Ambassador to Pakistan, I heard a lot about territorial demands (basically, Taliban governorships in the Pashtun south and east) and ministerial positions. Since I heard it from ISI, it makes me think that is what ISI wants, not necessarily what the Taliban wants. It may well be that the Taliban is more concerned about the administration of justice. Certainly, it does not promote a separatist agenda, seeing itself as having a national political role. As for the constitution, there is a body of opinion that holds that the Taliban does not so much object to the substance of the Afghan constitution, but rather the exclusion of the group in the drafting process. Again, there is more we don't know about Taliban desiderata than what we do know.

Any peace process will very quickly have to incorporate a regional dimension with a goal of minimizing hedging strategies. It must include Afghanistan's neighbors: certainly Pakistan, Iran and China, but also Russia and India. Pakistan's role is pivotal; it can help bring the Taliban to the table, or it can be a spoiler. Islamabad and Rawalpindi need to have an incentive for the process to succeed, so should be early participants in regional discussions. China has already demonstrated its commitment to a political settlement through its participation in the Quadrilateral Coordinating Group. Russia and Iran have made clear that they should be a part of the process, and to prevent their adopting a spoiling stance they should be included. India also has a large stake in regional stability. There will be questions of timing and sequencing of these discussions, which are best left to our diplomats on the scene.

A last point on modalities, it seems to me that this process does need a facilitator, an international actor acceptable to and trusted by both sides that can steer the process through its inevitable ups and downs. The Norwegian role in the Colombia negotiations is an obvious example, and I am certainly partial to Norwegian mediation, but obviously the key participants get a vote.

Finally, were a process like this to develop, it would still be vitally important for the United States and the International Community to continue to harden the Afghan state, consolidating the hard-fought gains that have been made over the past 16 years. The

Taliban will only negotiate if they believe they are unlikely to get what they want on the battlefield. So, ironically, pursuing reconciliation, at least in the short term, looks somewhat similar to a long-war strategy. Eventually, calibration of violence to reach a political effect may come into play, but for now we have to make sure that the Afghan State is in the strongest position possible, which is why I support the call for increased troop levels.

Having addressed the issue of diplomatic modalities, I suppose the key remaining question is what is the formula, the actual terms that would allow Afghans, Americans, neighbors and the International Community to bring to a conclusion a four-decade long conflict? It would be reckless of me to try to answer that question, especially when we do not really know much about Taliban negotiating positions. But it seems to me that a plausible outcome is one in which the Taliban comes into the Afghan political system, probably by means of a Loya Jirga which may change some elements of the Afghan constitution, but not the provisions affecting minority and women's rights. There would have to be a clear, unambiguous and verified break with Al Qaeda. I would not rule out the possibility of some residual US force levels, but clearly there would have to be some withdrawals. Without doubt, the negotiations will be difficult, and as with any negotiation, we should be prepared to walk away from them if the deal is not good enough.

Conclusion: I don't advocate peace talks with the Taliban because I have sympathy for them. I don't. There is much that is reprehensible about the group: their penchant for brutality and indiscriminate violence; their medieval ideology and celebration of backward rural traditions, notably with regard to women. At a personal level, they have murdered two of my friends. But that does not change the strategic case for attempting to resolve the conflict. I do not underestimate the difficulty and perhaps even impossibility of reaching agreement. But fundamentally, I arrive at the position of being in favor of a peace process because I think the other alternatives are either worse or unrealistic.

General Petraeus, when he was ISAF Commander was on the record as having identified a political settlement as the end objective of our Afghan wars. Indeed, every senior military officer I have met sees this as inevitable. The key question is the one Petraeus is said to have asked in Najaf in the spring of 2003, during a different war - "How does this end?" I see no other way than a political settlement, and urge that we get on with finding one before we have to find one.

Thank you for your attention.