

Event Transcript

U.S. Policy Toward Afghanistan: A Conversation with Thomas West

The Stimson Center
September 12, 2023

Featuring:

Thomas West, United States Special Representative to Afghanistan.

Elizabeth Threlkeld (moderator), Senior Fellow and Director, South Asia Program, Stimson Center

Brian Finlay (opening remarks), President and CEO, Stimson Center

Event Description

On the two-year anniversary of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Stimson Center's South Asia Program hosted a conversation with the U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan, Thomas West. In a candid discussion, West notes that there are still many issues which require the U.S.' continued engagement in Afghanistan. These issues include the humanitarian crisis, working with the Taliban on counter-terrorism efforts, and ensuring the return of women and girls to educational institutions in the country.

More information and event video available at: <https://www.stimson.org/event/us-policy-toward-afghanistan-a-conversation-with-tom-west/>

Event Transcript

Brian Finlay:

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Brian Finlay, I'm the president and CEO here at the Stimson Center. I'm so pleased to see so many of you joining us here in the room and online as well. We've been looking forward to this event for some time and based on the turnout here as well as online, you have as well.

For those of you who are new to Stimson, this is an organization that is dedicated to international security and shared prosperity around the globe. A key part of that, clearly for many years here at Stimson, has been our focus on South Asia. If you are in the market for cutting-edge analysis on South Asia, you have come to the right place, and you will see why in just a few minutes when I introduce my colleague Elizabeth Threlkeld who directs our South Asia programming here at Stimson.

Our programming here at Stimson on South Asia is not just the largest but may even be the longest-standing program in town focused on that part of the world. While I am admittedly paid to say this, I would not hesitate to say that our team provides the best independent analysis on South Asia in town, in the country, and for much of the world. It does so with the spirit of pragmatism as well as moving beyond just simply admiring the problem and actually getting their hands dirty wherever they can to try to

bring parties together in a meaningful way to make change around the world.

This year, we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of our South Asia program. It was founded by our late co-founder Michael Krepon, a name that I know is familiar to many in this room. Over the course of the past three decades, I have really been proud to witness firsthand not just the cutting-edge analysis that I referred to, but also the meaningful impact that this work has had on the subcontinent on big strategic trends as well as geopolitical dynamics in the region.

I'm particularly pleased to have established new partnerships through this program with many in the region and around the world that are dedicated to security and prosperity in South Asia. We do so through a number of interrelated tools I recommend to you if you are not familiar with our [South Asian Voices](#) online policy platform, where you will review and read a remarkable cross-section of ideas and opinions that are focused on the challenges that we all grapple with in the region. We have our [Strategic Learning](#) online courses that I would direct your attention to, as well as our annual [Visiting Fellowship](#) where we bring emerging leaders from the region here to Washington to experience not just Washington but one another and the wider policy community.

A key aspect of our South Asia program's work is understanding and informing policymakers and broader audiences on key regional developments. One of those issues is apropos to our topic here today: Afghanistan. Two years after the takeover by the Taliban and the continued economic humanitarian and security challenges that we are witnessing, the subject of conversation, of course, is extremely topical. It remains for us, I think for all of us, not just here in this room, or the audience online, but for all of us around the world, one of the pressing issues that deserves our ongoing attention.

It is an honor to welcome a very special guest here to Stimson today to reflect upon U.S. policy towards Afghanistan. He is, of course, U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan, Thomas West. This guy has perhaps the most unenviable job in Washington D.C. and yet he looks great, I think you'll agree, despite the hardships that this fellow has endured.

He has had a distinguished career of service in the U.S. government and a remarkable career of service to the American people. I would not normally belabor someone's resume, but it is worth just recognizing how much of his life has been given to this part of the world. He was previously the Senior Advisor for South Asia to then Vice President Joe Biden. He was Director for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the National Security Council from 2012 to 2015. Prior to that, he was the State Department's Senior

Diplomat in the Kunar province in Afghanistan where he embedded with the U.S. military and managed civilian staff in the PRT there. He also served as Special Assistant for South and Central Asia to the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs where he focused on the U.S.-India strategic partnership. Early in his career, Tom was a political officer at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad and a Desk Officer in Washington. He has clearly forgotten more about the region than many of us will ever learn, and we're grateful to have him.

Here's the order of battle here. We are going to give Tom just a few minutes to give some framing remarks, and then he will be joined by my colleague Elizabeth Threlkeld, who, as I mentioned, is the Director of our South Asia Program, a true expert on the region in her own right. Elizabeth will moderate a little discussion between the two of them and hopefully bring some of you in as well to the conversation. Tom, we are grateful to you for your service. We thank you for being here at Stimson, and I give you the floor, sir.

Thomas West:

Thank you, Brian, for that far too generous introduction. I think there is just an extraordinary wealth of experience here in the room, but first, Elizabeth, let me say it is such a pleasure to reconnect with you and I admire Stimson's work on the region. Thank you too to the audience members for joining and for this terrific turnout in the room. I am a person who has worked on Afghanistan for a long time, and I find it heartening that we can still generate this kind of turnout. A special warm welcome to those joining from Afghanistan where I hope you will have a connection that endures.

It has been over two years since the completion of our military withdrawal from Afghanistan, and it is an important juncture to reflect on where we stand on our national interests as well as the myriad of challenges that Afghans contend with in the country.

I want to say a few things about three issues. First, regarding terrorism. Our most critical enduring interest in Afghanistan is to ensure that it never again becomes a haven for those who wish the United States or our allies harm. The group that we worry the most about is the Islamic State branch in Afghanistan, ISKP. I think it is notable that since early 2023, Taliban raids in Afghanistan have removed at least eight key ISKP leaders, some responsible for external plotting. They have a very aggressive, violent, offensive ongoing that has significantly degraded ISKP capability. I do not want to overstate the case, as I said, we worry about this group. It clearly harbors an intent to conduct external operations, but the Taliban's offensive has been successful in significantly degrading their capability.

It is also positive for Afghans that, partly as a result of this offensive, year-on-year we have seen a steady decrease in large-scale ISKP attacks against

Afghan civilians. Think back to April 2022, for any who follow this region closely, there were horrific attacks in Kandahar, in Kabul, largely against the Hazara population, but we have not seen a return to those sorts of attacks since then.

It is our assessment that Al-Qaeda is at its historical nadir in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Their ability to threaten the United States from Afghanistan and Pakistan is probably at its lowest point since the group relocated to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996. They have lost leadership, they have lost target access, especially with the United States withdrawing our forces from Afghanistan, they've lost an accommodating local environment, and so that is all notable. The group that is posing the gravest threat to the stability of the region is Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan, TTP. We've seen a very significant increase in attacks directed at Pakistan.

All of that said, I also want to be clear that we maintain capabilities to monitor the situation ourselves. As we demonstrated when we took out Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda who was being sheltered by the Taliban in downtown Kabul in July of 2022, we can and will act to protect Americans when we must.

Second, we have an interest in addressing humanitarian needs and taking steps together with partners that help prevent economic implosion in Afghanistan. The scale of what's occurring in the country is truly devastating. Today, over 97% of Afghans live in poverty. About two-thirds of the population, 29.2 million people, require humanitarian assistance to survive. Many, many Afghans simply cannot make ends meet. Now, there are some signs of macroeconomic stability, which the World Bank has reported on: growing exports, currency stabilization, and declining inflation. But those gains, are not trickling down in a meaningful and large-scale way to the population.

Now, the implementers of humanitarian programming from international to local NGOs and UN bodies, they're under extraordinary pressure as well. They must deliver aid consistent with global principles. They have no choice, donors require it. And Taliban policies are making the delivery of that aid extremely difficult. Over the past two years, the United States has been the leading contributor of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan at about \$1.9 billion. I'm proud to say that the EU, Germany, the UK, Japan, Sweden, Italy, Canada, Australia, and I'm probably missing some top contributors as well, they have all stepped up in a major way to support the Afghan people. That has helped enormously to avert a widespread famine, to buttress the healthcare system to get Afghans the medicine and the winterization material that they most needed.

As we look to this year, we face about a \$2.4 billion shortfall in what the UN believes it needs to address humanitarian needs in Afghanistan. There

are two reasons for that. The first is that there is extraordinary humanitarian need elsewhere in the globe, in Sudan, Yemen, and Syria to name three countries. But the second reason is that Taliban policies are giving donors pause. They're not sure that humanitarian assistance can be delivered consistent with principles, and so those two factors are significant.

The last thing I'd say on the economic situation, which remains, as I said, dire, is that the United States feels that multilateral development banks still have an extraordinarily important role to play. The Asian Development Bank and the World Bank have stepped up and helped to meet basic needs and helped to address humanitarian suffering. There is a growing call among donors to work with multilateral development banks in a way that shifts the focus of programming away from purely humanitarian needs toward livelihood generation, something more sustainable. Now, exactly what that looks like, exactly what the programming entails, exactly how we support the growth, for instance, of private sector opportunities for women, that's a work in progress that MDBs, the Treasury Department, and USAID are engaged in now.

Regarding the human rights situation, let's not mince words. Let's acknowledge a truly wrenching reality for Afghans. As the UN Special Rapporteur noted in his June 20th report to the Human Rights Council, the Taliban are responsible for "a relentless issuance of edicts, decrees, declarations and directives restricting women and girls' rights, including their freedom of movement, their access to education, work, health, and justice." Millions of Afghan women and girls are still barred from attending secondary school, they're still barred from university, and from working to support their families. That is a reality that we do not shirk. There are widespread incredible reports, including from UNAMA, of torture and abuse of former Afghan security forces that we partnered with, of former officials that were affiliated with the Republic. The Taliban say that they are committed to a policy of general amnesty, but we do not see individuals being held accountable for clear, flagrant, and fatal violations of this policy.

The environment for journalists has gotten more dangerous and restrictive. Rights activists have been detained and tortured. As in many other autocracies, peaceful demonstration is extraordinarily dangerous in Afghanistan these days. Land has been seized unjustly by the Taliban and redistributed. Hazara and other Shia populations are experiencing displacement, persecution, and human rights abuses.

Now for our part, my colleague Rina Amiri is the lead in our government. She is the special envoy for Afghan women, girls, and human rights. It is her job not only to engage on these issues but also to ensure that they are mainstreamed across all the issues that we discuss with the Taliban. She

was with me and with our Chief of Mission to the Afghan Affairs Unit based in Doha, Karen Decker, when we met with the Taliban on July 30 and 31. Human rights were a part of what we discussed when we had an in-depth dialogue regarding narcotics issues, as well as the economy, as well as a humanitarian response.

Before we pivot to your questions, Elizabeth, I do want to reiterate that the United States does not support a return to wider armed conflict in Afghanistan. This is the position that I hear from Afghans that I speak to inside of the country, as well as outside of the country, civil society, business leaders, doctors, midwives, and even former political leaders. Afghanistan was at war for 44 years and there is, I think, consensus among Afghans that there should not be a return to armed conflict.

There s a whole lot to discuss today. I did not touch on narcotics, on the centrality of intra-Afghan dialogue to longer-term stability in Afghanistan, and I also didn't touch on how the international community organizes to engage and secure our interests. Thank you again for this opportunity and I look forward to your questions.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you so much, Tom, and let me join Brian in thanking you for your service in what I would imagine is a difficult job but a very important one.

To start out, I noticed in preparing for this that you are approaching your two-year anniversary in this position. Coming into the role in October of 2021, obviously soon after the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover. If I could just ask you to reflect a little bit on lessons learned from your tenure so far as you have sought to secure U.S. interests regarding Afghanistan in a really difficult landscape. What has worked, what has not?

Thomas West: That is a big question and it is a good one. I remember I was at the airport during the evacuation, partnering with our other diplomats, and military leaders, to engage with the Taliban at that time during an extremely fraught period. We found, and as others have publicly acknowledged, that we were able to cooperate with the Taliban on certain discrete issues. We were able to see them close roads, help with crowds, and prevent terrorist disruption. When we left, we certainly had an option: we could pursue a policy of isolation, we could pursue a policy of engagement, or even a policy of opposition, and we chose engagement. In my view, that was the right course. It is also fair, however, to look back and question what that engagement has produced. I think it has produced clarity and insight into steps that the Taliban are taking to fulfill their security commitments.

Regarding the humanitarian response, it is notable that implementers can deliver consistent with global principles now. On freedom of movement and the continuing effort we must relocate Afghans to whom we owe a special commitment, doing that smoothly requires engagement with the

Taliban. On detained American citizens, we engaged, and four Americans have returned. Now, I do not want to sugarcoat things, there are still multiple Americans in the Taliban's custody whom we believe are wrongfully detained, but that engagement continues. Let us be clear about what engagement has not produced. It has not produced intra-Afghan dialogue; it has not produced a more representative government or the return of millions of girls to school and women to university. So those are issues that are absolutely a work in progress.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: If we were to take a different tact, of those three options that you outlined in terms of how the U.S. could approach the region, if we were to pursue a policy of isolation and try to come at this with more of a stick, less carrot, less engagement, what do you think the outcome would be in that case?

Thomas West: Well, let us just look back at the past year. In December and then in October of 2022, I had a series of engagements with senior Taliban leaders. At the time, it was widely known that the Taliban were contemplating the issuance of the edicts that they released in December. I was just one diplomat among many trying to discourage them from going that path.

Now, understandably, we went through a long period of not engaging with the Taliban. Over that period on detainee issues, humanitarian assistance issues, and relocation issues, I do not think we made as much progress as we have in periods when we have remained engaged with the Taliban.

Now there are questions of the level of disengagement that occurs. As I said, we have a capable group of foreign service officers based in Doha right now who are leading the Afghan Affairs Unit, and they are in regular touch with Taliban leaders who are also based in Doha. I think there is a give-and-take regarding the level that makes the most sense.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: You are one of, if not the only U.S. official, who has probably spent the most time across the table with the Taliban over the past couple of years in these negotiations. I wonder if you have gotten a sense of what the Taliban want. What are their goals to the extent that you've been able to divine?

Thomas West: I will not speak to what they want domestically, you could ask the Taliban. In terms of what they want from the United States, and from the international community, what they say publicly is what we hear privately as well. They want sanctions relief, development aid, a big seat at the table in designing an economic intervention in the country, completion of legacy infrastructure projects, and to seat their permanent representative in New York. They want big steps toward normalization, that are not going to be possible, and I think there will remain remarkable unity among the international community until and unless we see a significant change in their treatment of half the population.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: I am glad you ended with that because I do want to pick up on that. I will admit that for my own purposes, I have been surprised by the consensus that we've seen internationally towards non-recognition. What we haven't seen is a return to the 1990s where we had three countries that recognized the Taliban. I wonder from your perspective how solid you think that non-recognition consensus is internationally, and what might some of the risks or downsides be if it were to break down?

Thomas West: There are always risks that there will be a break and that the region will break consensus and move ahead. It is not because the United States is pleading with countries not to take significant steps toward normalization, but rather it has to do with a strong consensus on three big issues.

First, the Taliban need to fundamentally fulfill their security obligations. While I said there have been good steps in that regard, progress is deemed, not just by the United States but by other countries including in the region, as insufficient so far. Number two, there is a consensus that to achieve longer-term stability, the country requires a dialogue among Afghans that leads to a more representative system. That is not just coming from us, it is also coming from countries with which the United States has grave differences. More loudly from Russia and Iran than any other country. Third, their policies vis-a-vis women and girls are not only abhorrent but also destabilizing. The consensus on not moving ahead with sanctions relief, with the return of assets, with normalization of their IFI relationships, with a restoration of the travel ban waiver, that consensus is pretty strong unless we see movement on those issues.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: To my mind, that is more remarkable to an extent, in this current era that we seem to have moved into of great power competition, the U.S.-China rivalry. Speaking with contacts in the region around the time of the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover, I heard a lot of prognostications that this was going to be China's opportunity to come in and take advantage of the U.S.' foibles in Afghanistan, to pursue mining and investment and extension of the China-Pakistan economic corridor for example. To date, we really have not seen that play out, certainly to the extent that some had envisioned.

I wonder if you could situate for us, relations internationally around Afghanistan in the context of U.S.-China competition. Is this one area that is somewhat insulated from that rivalry? How would the U.S. look at a potential increase in Chinese investment in Afghanistan?

Thomas West: We do not see Afghanistan as an area for geopolitical competition. I have not studied this as carefully as I should, but as I have looked at the real reporting regarding Chinese investment in Afghanistan, as you said, it is not as significant as some had forecast. To be honest, since you are asking

me, I have no objection to a greater Chinese economic intervention, and I also do not forecast that one will be forthcoming.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: I want to take you back to one of those conditions that you mentioned in the context of the international consensus against normalization, and that is the importance of intra-Afghan dialogue and inclusivity. That was obviously one of the points of the Doha Agreement, and in the context of the Taliban takeover the situation has certainly changed, but I wonder what potential, if any, you see for intra-Afghan dialogue today? What form it could take, what role, if any, is there for the U.S., for the international community in fostering it?

Thomas West: There are many, many efforts among Afghans, largely outside of the country, but also including Afghans from inside the country, to get organized around a coherent alternative political vision for the country, a move toward a fundamentally more inclusive system. In my view, it would damage their efforts for any of those groups to be seen as too closely affiliated with the United States. I try to keep my distance from some of those efforts. When those folks summon me, the EU representative, and others from the region, then we should engage in a serious dialogue with them. But I really think that for those efforts to achieve the success that they must, for those Afghans to sit with strong spines and coherent vision across the table from the Taliban, they need to achieve unity themselves first. As I said, there are many efforts underway in Istanbul and Germany, in the country itself, and I stand ready and willing to engage with them when they ask me to.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: I would imagine that the dynamic you just touched on, perhaps the challenging position of being a U.S. representative working on sensitive issues regarding Afghanistan, might carry through to several issues across your portfolio. One that comes to mind is human rights issues, the concerns that you raised in terms of the treatment of women and minorities. Perhaps this is not a dynamic that you run into, and I'd be curious to hear, but it strikes me that there is a risk of all the U.S. and other Western and international support for the importance of human rights issues that could backfire domestically within the Afghan context and perhaps shrink space for flexibility on these issues within the Taliban. Is that something that you have seen, and if so, how are you threading that needle?

Thomas West: To be honest with you, Elizabeth, no, I have not seen that. Nobody within the Taliban has ever come to me and said, hey, could you please pipe down so that we can move? In fact, the driving imperative is going to come from inside Afghanistan. If a change is to occur on allowing girls to go to secondary school and women to go to university, it is going to come from inside the country. It is not going to come because I ask for it, because the Qataris ask for it, it'll be an internal matter.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: I want to shift gears a bit and ask a reflective question as we have just passed two years since the takeover. We heard a lot of questions about the role and the value of the Doha Agreement. It is not something that we have heard very much about lately, and yet it remains the single agreement that the U.S. has with the Taliban albeit from an earlier time. I wonder, what would you say is the role of the Doha Agreement today?

Thomas West: Elizabeth, it does not come up. I do not sit with the Doha Agreement open and note all the ways in which the Taliban have violated it. They likewise do not hold it up. We are guided by our interests in Afghanistan now. Certainly, the commitments they made, particularly regarding security, we consider binding, but the Doha Agreement as a practical matter does not come up.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Picking up on one of the topics that you didn't cover in as much length in your remarks, but I hope you might expand on, is the situation with narcotics. This is one that perhaps didn't get the attention that it should in the media here in the U.S. What is your assessment of the Taliban's claims of dramatically reduced levels of opium cultivation? Where does that stand?

Thomas West: I was among the huge skeptics when the Taliban announced a ban on poppy cultivation, and the best reporting on this subject that has come out is from a British company that focuses on imagery called Alcis. If you really dig into this reporting, it makes clear that over the past year, the Taliban implemented that ban on poppy cultivation and brought cultivation down by over 80%, including in Helmand, which produced about 80% of Afghanistan's opium. That is quite significant.

At the same time, the export of dried opiates has not abated, and a lot of farmers are still sitting on a lot of stores, and that is a challenge. The picture of synthetic drug production is a bit more mixed. We have seen the Taliban go after some of the largest concentrations of meth labs, but we also see evidence of ephedra cultivation getting more and more remote. The picture is truly mixed.

On our end, this is an area that is important for engagement, not just between the United States and the Taliban, but let us look at where opium is landing. It is landing on the streets of many of our allies in Europe. As I have talked to my counterparts, we see this as an area that we hope they will engage with the Taliban as well.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Another issue that you alluded to is this question of how the international community organizes itself around policy in Afghanistan. I will note the UN Security Council back in March had resolved to request an independent assessment looking at international policy to address Afghanistan's challenges. That is due out in November, so we do not have

the results yet. From your perspective, how do you think international cooperation on Afghanistan is working today? What form might it take going forward?

Thomas West: We spent many months before the May 1 and 2 gatherings that Secretary-General Guterres convened, trying to generate support for a UN-led political process on Afghanistan. There is a UN-led processes in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Myanmar. We felt that the conditions were right for an UN-led process in Afghanistan as well because of the unity I spoke of regarding shared interests. Unfortunately, there is no P-5 consensus for such a process, so I think we're seeking to pivot to a group of countries aligning policies in acting together. A group of countries stands a better chance of being launched if we are not the ones to organize it, and so there are a range of countries in the region that are taking the initiative. No news to report, but let's see how that develops.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: We will watch the space. A different angle of the international cooperation question is that of international assistance. You noted this in your remarks, but just last week we saw word from the UN World Food Program that an additional two million Afghans had been dropped from the assistance roles. Today we're seeing the terrible news out of Libya, we are in no shortage of international emergencies to respond to. In a time of donor fatigue, I wonder, is the current model of international assistance in Afghanistan sustainable? What needs to change?

Thomas West: No, it is not. If we continue the exact model that we have pursued over the past two years, then the humanitarian crisis will grow, and the humanitarian price tag will also grow. That is why, as I said, donors are increasingly interested in programming that focuses on a growth of the private sector, including, in my view, opportunities for women as well as livelihood generation. I wish I had more to tell you on this front, but it is a very active discussion among donors. It will come up on the margins of the fall World Bank meetings. It will also feature, probably, in some discussions over the allocation and the character of what is called own-bank financing. Now, both the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have own-bank finances that can be devoted to Afghanistan. The treasury department and AID lead that effort, but I think when it comes to Afghanistan it will be very important to monitor.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: One element of this picture that we have not touched on in detail is the Afghan fund: the 3.5 billion in central bank funds that are in a Swiss account now. That was created, or at least announced, around a year ago this week, if I am not mistaken. Where do things stand now?

Thomas West: It was launched a year ago, the board of trustees has gathered multiple times, we have a website where we publish the minutes of exactly what gets discussed. Nobody is trying to hide the ball on what the Afghan fund

is deliberating. A lot of their actions so far have been administrative, they needed an executive director, they are looking to form a board of advisors that would include both foreign talent as well as Afghan talent, and there have been some discussions regarding potential uses, potential expenditures, but I would not go too far on that front because nothing has been approved by the board.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: We have a packed house, I think standing room only in the back, so I do want to turn to questions. We also have a substantial virtual audience tuning in, so please submit your questions. I have a handy tablet here where I can pull them up, so we will be doing a mix of both. I will start with a virtual question.

This one comes from Barney Rubin, a friend of yours. Barney asks, "Afghanistan's neighbors include China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and India. How have the dramatic changes in U.S. relations with all these countries affected U.S. policy towards Afghanistan? To what extent does the U.S. engage these countries about Afghanistan?"

Thomas West: There are probably limits to what I can say about that engagement in a public forum, but I'm in regular touch with my Chinese counterpart. I am not in touch with my Russian counterpart, for obvious reasons. I'm not in touch with my Iranian counterpart. They were all in the room of envoys for the May 1 and 2 meetings. There was a format of Russia, China, Pakistan, and the United States called the Expanded Troika, that my predecessor launched during the last administration. That format has not reconvened, and I think we all know why.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: I will take another question here actually from a colleague on the South Asia Program, my colleague Uzair Sattar. Similarly, as we just looked back two years, asking you to look forward at least to the end of this Biden administration, we'll see what happens thereafter. But with two years of hindsight, do you foresee significant shifts in U.S. policy towards Afghanistan through the end of this administration, absent unforeseen triggers or catalyzing events? In other words, is U.S. policy better captured as one of maintaining what existing stability or status quo has developed, or expecting some sort of dynamic response to on-ground changes?

Thomas West: We are going to continue to advance American interests. We are going to continue to support the Afghan people. We are going to continue, for now, a policy of engagement with all Afghans and that includes the Taliban. I do not think it is a useful exercise to speculate about what significant changes could occur, but we will adjust as needed.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Questions from the audience here? I see Dave Smith up in the front.

Dave Smith: Thank you. Dave Smith, I'm a Fellow with Stimson, and I'm also proud to say that I once worked with Tom at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad a very long time ago. My question was about Pakistan. For so many years we looked at Pakistan through the lens of Afghanistan, and for the last two years, we had to look through a different lens. Pakistan took a quick victory lap, having been a sanctuary and a source of operational support for the Taliban government for many years. Now the shoe seems to be on the other foot, and Afghanistan seems to be a sanctuary for the TTP. I'm wondering if you can tell us about the connection between the Taliban government and the TTP. Is it a question of operational support or is it a question of active participation? And then secondly, is Pakistan a help or a hindrance in the U.S. achieving its goals that you laid out for Afghanistan?

Thomas West: On the Taliban's relationship with the TTP, anybody who is focused on this region since the birth of the TTP understands well that as they were pushed across the border, they became allies of the Taliban during the war. They were financial supporters, logistical supporters, and operational allies. The ties between them are quite tight. As for whether the Taliban are supporting TTP attacks against Pakistan, that's a tough one and probably gets beyond what I'm able to talk about publicly. It is no secret that this is the issue that dominates Pakistan's engagement with the Taliban now. Is Pakistan a hindrance or a help, I would say on balance they are a help. They are certainly a partner when it comes to security issues, they are a helpful troubleshooter on relocation-related issues as well. They have been helpful to us when it comes to refugee processing as well. On balance, I would say a help.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: I think I am going to combine a few of these virtual questions because we're getting a lot of them on this issue, so I do want to address it, though I recognize that your office is not the one that tackles this issue directly. Undoubtedly one of the key considerations for many in this room and as well as our audience is, what the U.S. is doing to assist those Afghans who worked alongside us for 20 years in Afghanistan. How is that process going? What can you share on the status and where we might be headed with relocations?

Thomas West: I know how important this issue is to all Americans who served in Afghanistan, to Afghans who've relocated here, some of whose family members still need to rejoin them. It is a work in progress. We thank our Qatari partners for their extraordinary help in this process. It is an issue that requires, as I said, engagement with the Taliban. This is a commitment that will endure in this administration, it will be led by our Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, Mara Tekach, and I will do everything I can to support it.

Audience Member: Thank you for the talk. One region that hasn't really been brought up yet is Central Asia. There is a large Afghan refugee population in Tajikistan and

there were concerns among the community that they were being threatened with deportation by the government around this time last year. These places are struggling with different inter-ethnic conflicts within their own borders as well as with the newcomers coming up from Afghanistan. There are also concerns about extremist violence. How is your office handling that region and do you have a plan in place, if the concerns in Afghanistan move north?

Thomas West: I was just in Central Asia in Astana for the first-ever Afghanistan-focused C5+1 meeting. That was a helpful and useful exchange that I think should continue. Rina joined me for that exchange as well and we did deal with human rights. The Central Asian countries do not pursue a uniform policy. There are big differences between, how Tajikistan is treating the situation versus how Uzbekistan is treating the situation. But like us, although with a different level of imperative given that they have huge borders, they are seeking to problem-solve daily. They have border officials in touch with one another and they have concerns about the pressures of refugees really increasing at a much higher rate, so it is a dialogue that we will continue.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: A question, since we have just covered the region, I'm going to pull together a couple that we've received virtually and focus a bit more on South Asia. You touched on this in your response to Barney's question, but I wonder a little bit more broadly in terms of the engagement that you have been doing with partners around the region, are there any through-lines that you've been hearing in your dialogue when you visit the region? Any opportunities or interests that you have heard in economic connectivity and cooperation, particularly keeping in mind Pakistan, India, Central Asia, to the extent that you have not covered it, Iran as well? I know it is a challenging region but help us get a sense of the regional landscape that you're hearing from.

Thomas West: The biggest contrast that I saw between countries of the region, and especially major donors and democracies, at the May 1 and 2 meeting was on this issue. The region for their own economic reasons, and because they don't want refugees in the millions spilling across borders, they want to hit the gas pedal on economic stabilization. When it comes to regional connectivity projects, it is not a high priority for the United States to look at those projects, and I understand that most of them would need MDB financing to move ahead.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Other questions from the room?

Samiullah Al-Agzai: Thank you so much. This is Samiullah Al-Agzai from UA Afghanistan Service. I have two very quick and short questions. If the Taliban does not listen to the West, especially to the U.S. on the topic of human rights, education, women in the workforce, etc., how do you see the future of the relationship between the U.S. and the Taliban? And second question, most

of the officials in the Republic, the former government, blame the U.S. for the current chaotic situation in Afghanistan, especially the first deputy of President Ghani said that it is a shame for the U.S. that they left Afghanistan in the current situation. What's your answer to that? Thank you.

Thomas West:

Thank you. First on women's issues. As I said before, if there is a shift on this set of issues it will not be because of foreign pressure, it will be because Afghans have called for this shift. The Taliban will do it because it is in the best interest of the country domestically, first and foremost. I think it is also positive, however, that Muslim-majority countries have taken up the mantle on this set of issues. The OIC has an envoy named Ambassador Bakheet, Special Envoy Bakheet. He is very steadily engaged on this set of issues, so is Indonesia's foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, so is Qatar, so is the UAE, so is Saudi Arabia. We need to continue to give pride of place on this set of issues to Muslim-majority countries when it comes to foreign engagement.

On the Republic's former officials blaming the United States for what has occurred, it'll be an important exercise for all countries who engaged in Afghanistan to look back and consider what we did right and what we did wrong. I think a similar process needs to go on among Afghans who were our partners. Why were we unable to tackle corruption in a meaningful way? Why was it that Afghan forces fought very valiantly, let me be clear, over many years and lost tens of thousands of soldiers, but without the enablers they needed, why did they fail to stand up for a longer period? Why did countries in the region pursue the policies that are no secret to us, including allowing the Taliban to operate a haven next door? I mean, all of us need to collectively look back. There is now an Afghanistan War Commission that is bipartisan, they are committed to looking at key decisions that were made and the administration and both parties should support that commission's work.

Elizabeth Threlkeld:

A question here from our virtual audience. Something that we do not actually always think about in the context of Afghanistan is the issue of climate change, which is obviously impacting the whole world, but South Asia quite acutely. Noting the water stress that the country is under as well as ongoing differences with neighbors, including Iran and Pakistan as well, over the flow of rivers and damming projects; is there anything that the U.S., either your office or other parts of the State Department, are doing on water issues in Afghanistan? Is there any room for engagement there?

Thomas West:

Afghanistan is among the top 10 countries most at climate risk. That is well known. It was a quite steady drought that produced the horrific low yields last year and fed the humanitarian crisis. It is a real need of the Afghan people to see climate needs addressed in a more meaningful way.

My office has not focused on this set of issues yet. Yes, I think there would be openness, certainly with COP 28 coming up. It may make sense for us to also engage with our Emirati counterparts on this issue and I'd be open to doing so.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Other questions from the room? Yes, sir.

Aref Yaqubi: Thank you so much, Aref Yaqubi from Afghanistan International. I have two questions here. Thank you for this opportunity. My first question is from the United States point of view. Let us imagine that the Taliban do not harbor al-Qaeda, hypothetically, would the United States be fine with that regime in Afghanistan, with Mullah Hibatullah as the leader and Sirajuddin Haqqani as the interior minister, and so on and so forth? What is the U.S. policy on that?

My second question is, do you think that the Taliban have changed? Many Afghans, say that they have not changed, but they are stronger. They can torture more people because they have power and they have guns. What do you think? If the Taliban have changed, why do Afghans not see that change? If they have not changed, what makes you confident that they don't harbor al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan? Where does that confidence come from? Thank you so much.

Thomas West: Thank you. I will admit I didn't quite understand your first question, but I will take a stab at it. As I said before, it is a consensus within most, not all, but most of the international community, that we need to place a very high priority on the initiation of a dialogue among Afghans. Afghans are organizing themselves of their own volition and without foreign interference. We hope that that process will eventually lead to a fundamentally more representative system. It is not for the United States to prescribe a formula on what a system would look like, but if Afghans took those steps, including the Taliban, it could very well lead to a much better relationship with the international community including with the United States.

Regarding whether the Taliban have changed. On the terrorism front, my assessment is that the Taliban understand that they need to fulfill their security commitments to protect their own sovereignty. They do not want the United States to act on Afghan soil, as we did when we took out the leader of al-Qaeda. They're not doing this as a favor to us, they are doing it to seek stability in the country as well as maintain sovereignty.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: I think we have time for one more question here. Go in the back?

Akriti Vasudeva
Kalyankar:

Thank you so much SRUS for those remarks and for being so candid. I am Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar, a Fellow here with the South Asia Program.

You touched on this a little bit in terms of regional engagement that the U.S. has with partners, but I wanted to drill down a bit into India. Since India's becoming such a critical partner of the U.S. in managing many of the issues in the region, just wondering what U.S. engagement has been like with India with regards to the Taliban. We have seen that India is one of the countries that has a technical mission in Kabul and is focusing specifically on infrastructure development and working directly with the Afghan people. Obviously, we know the reservations that India has had in engaging the Taliban before, just wanted to kind of get a sense of how U.S. engagement with India on Afghanistan has evolved over time.

Thomas West: Sure. I'm in very close touch with my Indian counterpart, JP Singh. He is a super capable diplomat with a ton of experience in the region. India is pursuing its interests, and those interests include supporting the Afghan people, and they have been very generous on the humanitarian front. It is my understanding that the technical mission has been open for some time and that it is focused on humanitarian issues as well. I would really have to refer you to Indian officials though for a steer on exactly how their policy has evolved over time.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: All right if you will indulge me one more question. We just got this one in from Christina Goldbaum from the New York Times. Drilling down on the CT issue that we have gone into already, but a different angle of this now. She asks, over the past two years, leaders of the Haqqani network have pitched themselves as the most moderate and pragmatic allies within the Taliban government for Western readers. Quite a turnabout from the war. What do you believe are the Haqqani's goals within the government, within Afghanistan, and do you believe that they could be reliable U.S. partners especially when it comes to counterterrorism?

Thomas West: I am going to give an unsatisfactory answer on this one. I understand the question, but it is not for me to talk about differences among various factions. What the United States cares about is results in the country. We want to be sure that they fulfill their security commitments, we want to see women return to university, girls to secondary school, and the country to stabilize economically. We are going to engage with the Taliban as a part of that process.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: We are just about at time. I want to give you the opportunity, any concluding remarks, or things you would like to add that we have not covered already?

Thomas West: No, I don't think so. I would say that... I say no, I do not think so, and then I have something to say.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: A true diplomat.

Thomas West: Yeah. For anyone who cares about Afghanistan and cares about the Afghan people, the thing I worry most about is that Afghanistan will totally recede from our attention. It should not be a top national security objective or priority. It should not occupy the time of our senior-most decision-makers. But it is a bipartisan interest that we continue to support the Afghan people, that we see no security threats emerge from the region. I hope think tanks will continue writing about Afghanistan, I hope you will invite me back to say more things, and we owe it to ourselves to not take our eye completely off the ball.

Elizabeth Threlkeld: Thank you so much, Tom, for joining us and taking the time. I very much look forward to continuing the conversation down the road.

I should also say, though I am the Director of the South Asia program, one of the great things about being at Stimson is the colleagues that we have in this room and outside. I have been fortunate to co-host this event alongside two who care very deeply about Afghanistan, Andrew Hyde, and Richard Ponzio, I also see Chris Preble in the room who's doing some great work on Afghanistan. Thank you to my Stimson colleagues for making this happen. Thank you, Tom, to your team and for joining us, and to you all for joining us in person and online. Thanks very much.

Thomas West: Thank you.