



STOPPING THE TALIBAN'S MOMENTUM?

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2010

9:00 A.M.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

WELCOME/MODERATOR:

Elizabeth Bumiller

Pentagon Correspondent

New York Times

SPEAKERS:

Gilles Dorronsoro

Visiting Scholar

Carnegie Endowment

Transcript by Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

ELIZABETH BUMILLER: All right, well, I'd like to say welcome to everyone for coming out on an early – on a Thursday morning. This is going to be a very interesting program. My name is Elizabeth Bumiller. I'm a Pentagon correspondent for The New York Times. I just got back from Afghanistan, myself, on Tuesday.

And this is our featured speaker here, Gilles Dorronsoro, who is a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment. And he's an expert on Afghanistan, Turkey and South Asia. His research, which I've had the pleasure of interviewing him in the past, his research focuses on security and political development in Afghanistan and particularly the role of ISAF and the necessary steps for a viable government in Kabul and the conditions necessary for the withdrawal of international troops.

[00:00:54]

So what I'm going to do is ask Gilles some questions. He was just in Afghanistan in July and also in May. And I will ask him a bunch of questions about what he saw, what he thinks about the future, what's going on there. And I'll go or about half-an-hour or so and then I will turn everything over to you because I know you have lots of questions. And I'll be happy to answer some too, to the extent that I can.

So let's start out right away. You were there in July. Why don't you just give us a brief overview of what you saw, where you went and what you think the security and political situation is in Afghanistan?

GILLES DORRONSORO: I was in Afghanistan in July [01:32]. And I was – I was very surprised because in four months, I was assuming that the situation would be more or less the same, you know? And in four months, what I've seen the quick deterioration of the security and it was very surprising.

[00:01:50]

Very concretely, now, you have major security problem in – that wasn't the case before, especially the road between Kabul and Jalalabad. I hope I'm getting the places right – (chuckles) – because they're very clear from here. And you have, now, twice a week or three times a week, you have an ambush in the road, especially against NATO convoy.

You have Taliban groups that are now very near the city of Kabul, not inside, though. Inside the city, the security is okay, but 20 kilometers from the city of Kabul, you have Taliban groups – armed Taliban groups in the villages at night or even during the day from time to time.

So the overall situation is deteriorating quickly around here so I would put much more red than is in the map right now. And here, also, situation is basically out of control in these two provinces. Knowing that here, you have more and more insecurity, here also. So the overall situation is a quick deterioration and that's what I've seen in July.

People are extremely afraid and for civil servant, Afghan civil servant, the situation is difficult because when you take a car from Kabul, you want to go south or you want to go north or east, it's more and more difficult because if there is a Taliban checkpoint on the road and they see that you're working for the government, well, you for sure could be shotten (sic).

And in the south, my feeling is a bit – could be more precise about that. My feeling is that there is no progress in the sense that the coalition is not able to build a strong Afghan partner that could take – take the security in charge in the next few years.

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

So if you're very optimistic, you could think that maybe in five years, in Helmand, the situation will be okay. But most probably, 10 years or even never. And the situation is much worse in Kandahar, of course, because Helmand has never been a stronghold of the Taliban, contrary to what is said in there, but Kandahar is definitely.

[00:04:10]

So Kandahar, you have the perfect setting for the Taliban. They have the strongest, I recall, footing there. The local administration is totally corrupt and you have, let's be frank, what I would call xenophobic tradition here. So they don't especially like foreign males, especially when they are armed.

So the support for the coalition in the places where actually the coalition is fighting is zero or maybe negative, if it makes sense. So no possibility of quick result and quick failures, of quick result in the south and a general deterioration everywhere else and that would be my first assessment.

MS. BUMILLER: Well, let me ask, what has happened in a year that, as I was just – I was in Kabul and Helmand just last week and it was absolutely true in Kabul. You cannot leave Kabul anymore, safely on the roads. In Helmand, I was embedded with the Marines, so I was able to move around. But what has happened in a year that security in the north and the east has deteriorated so much? It was a traditionally – those areas were relatively – relatively – stable.

MR. DORRONSORO: Yes, relatively. Two things to think about.

(Cross talk.)

[00:05:24]

MR. DORRONSORO: So first, I'm very happy you were in Marja and you're back – (chuckles) – because it's becoming – congratulations. And for the north, it's been a few years now. I think, first, we assumed that because the people are not in majority Pashtun in the north, it was stable. It's wrong. Why?

Because, first, you have Pashtun pockets and when I'm speaking of pockets in the province of Kunduz, it's 40 percent of the population being Pashtun, so it's a large pocket. You have pockets of Pashtun, here, also, in Baghlan. So you have Pashtun constituency for the Taliban, you would say. People are ready to work because of local ethnic tensions or because they don't want the central government.

But you have also non-Pashtun Taliban, more and more. Why? Because when you have a situation of political chaos and that's more and more what's happening in the north because you don't have state structure anymore in the north, you know? Basically, the state doesn't exist anymore. What's happening is that two groups are fighting or three groups are fighting.

And when you're fighting, what do you need? You need support from outside and the support can be somebody in the government who is giving you arms or it could be – it could be the Taliban. It's a good deal. Everybody's anticipating the victory of the Taliban. So for example, you're Uzbek and you're living here in – (inaudible).

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

Your political analysis is that they have no think tank, but they still – they still have political analysis. They think that the Taliban are going to be in power in five years, so what do you do? You make a deal with the Taliban and you can launch attacks on your neighbors here and there because you – (inaudible) – that are not especially political. It's land problem, but you're using that, okay.

[00:07:16]

So more and more, the Taliban are able to have local contacts. It's ideological or non-ideological, but they are larger than the Pashtun base. And that's the first thing. The second thing is that you have a quick deterioration that is producing the next deterioration. It's a feedback – it's a negative feedback.

What's happening, concretely, now, on the field? You have – here, you have German soldier. You have 3,000 Marines, but mostly, it's Germans who are here. They are basically useless. They are guarding their own camp. So it's not a big deal for the Taliban if they don't want to fight the German, they just go around the camp.

MS. BUMILLER: I'm sorry, where are the Germans?

MR. DORRONSORO: The Germans are in Kunduz and Mazar.

MS. BUMILLER: So they're not leaving their basis, is what you're saying?

MR. DORRONSORO: They are leaving their bases on a very careful – I mean, I mean it's not important for the Taliban. The Germans are just, you know, they don't want to fight. They have no tradition.

[00:08:17]

MS. BUMILLER: They have no tradition? (Laughter.)

MR. DORRONSORO: I mean –

MS. BUMILLER: Not recent tradition. (Laughter.) Right, right.

MR. DORRONSORO: That's – we've tried very hard after the Second World War to be sure that there was no more any kind of German tradition, fighting, you know? And we succeeded perfectly. (Laughter.) So it's not a secret if I say that the German do not know how to fight a war against people who are very motivated and very aggressive. They are just lost. Same remark for the Italians and so on and so on.

So you have armies that are totally unable to do counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency is tough work. You have to wander. You have to use infantry. You have to go to the contact. You have to do all that. The Germans do not know how to do that. Plus, there is the thing that there is political, informal caveats – no casualties.

You have to understand that all the European armies are working with the idea that they don't want casualties. If you don't want casualties, how do you win a war without casualties? So what's happening, typically?

The German or the French or the Italian, I don't want to put everything on the German, are attacked. There is an ambush. Traditionally, you go after the guys. After that, you kill the guys. You can take a few casualties, but

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

you're reacting. What is happening now is that the European armies do not react, okay, they protect themselves, they're good, but they don't go after the guy who made the ambush.

[00:09:52]

And it's all like that, you know. So basically, yes, you have – you have 11,000, but it's not real troops, you know? And the same thing for the Spanish in – (inaudible) – who are totally isolated. So that's a key point. The more the Taliban are in control of a place, the less the coalition can go out. It takes hours to do 300 meters in Arghandab. It's true for everybody.

In Arghandab, for example, north of Kandahar, you want to go out of the post. A friend of mine who is journalist told me that it was eight hours to go to the next village that was half-a-mile because you have to be sure there is no IEDs, there was an ambush and so on and so on. This was eight hours and going back.

So basically, you spend your day going to the next village. Don't even think about the idea of surprise because everybody knows you're coming. You're totally inefficient on the military point of view. And that's the situation of almost everybody in Afghanistan right now. Maybe it's a little bit different in the south because the Marines have more tradition.

[00:11:05]

MS. BUMILLER: I can talk to that, yeah.

MR. DORRONSORO: Yeah, but basically, everywhere else, the situation – the coalition is on the defensive. They don't control the ground. They have no local partners, or less and less local partners. And so they are losing the war, basically.

MS. BUMILLER: I just would say in Helmand, you know, I was in Marja and there's 20,000 Marines in Helmand and there's 2,000 in Marja, which is not that big of an area and I would say they are aggressively going out. You know, I saw it, but it's very, very hard and very, very slow and it's a mix of walking into ambushes, knowing they're going to walk into ambushes and killing people and getting killed themselves and it's a mix of –

MR. DORRONSORO: And killing no civilian, or you cannot fire on a building.

MS. BUMILLER: It's very hard; it's very hard. And also, then, doing counterinsurgency, sitting down and having shuras and having teas at the same time you've got other guys out there tracking Taliban. So it's very, very slow and very difficult. But they are not – I can attest, they're not sitting on bases. They're not.

MR. DORRONSORO: No, no, that's the exception. But I was thinking about European – Europeans are basically not –

MS. BUMILLER: And there's a lot of tension between, as you know, the British and the Marines because the Marines have just taken over the area of Sangar from the British and I would say the British certainly took a lot of casualties and the name Sangar is very notorious in Britain because of that.

[00:12:25]

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

But anyway, that's a whole other argument. Let me ask you about – so the concentration of troops in the south and in Helmand and now in Kandahar, that was – you feel that was a complete mistake, that the surge was a mistake – you feel, you told me earlier, you felt the surge was a mistake and the concentration of all the troops in what's called that Taliban heartland was a mistake.

MR. DORRONSORO: Yes, a mistake because the consequences. We have all the – the best troops here. People are all fighting very hard. We have a tradition and it's 60,000 here. It's the bulk of the U.S. forces. So if there is an offensive. If you have to go after the Taliban, it's the U.S. forces. And so they are stuck here where you don't have any kind of result in the next five years, I would say.

A result is when you can leave and give the place to the Afghan army. That's where you are going, basically. And it's impossible to think about that in Helmand or in Kandahar in the next five years. And at the same time, because all the best troops here, the whole country is open for the Taliban.

[00:13:40]

And when you have a major problem near Kabul, what's – politically – what's going to happen next year is that the Taliban will be very, very, very close to the capital. They already – but they can send rockets. It's not a military problem, it's a political problem. What's going to happen if the Taliban are sending 20 rockets a week on Kabul?

You're going to see what you saw already in process, the foreigners are going to leave Kabul. It's going to be more and more a perception of failure. And I don't see how it's possible to think that next year, the situation is going to be better. Everything – absolutely everything – indicates that the situation is going to be much worse next year.

MS. BUMILLER: How much of a factor is the Karzai government? We all – obviously, there's endless stories in the papers now about the corruption. If – would it matter if the Karzai government were the best government in South Asia right now? Would that matter or does it not matter because everything is locally controlled?

MR. DORRONSORO: It's a very particular (ph) question. (Chuckles.) The best government in the – but the story is not corruption, but I think there's a misreading of the situation. The real story is not corruption. The real story is the shrinking presence of the Afghan government. I don't care very much if it's corrupt, but at least it should be there.

What we are seeing right now in all these areas, for example, is the disintegration of the state. There is no state, corrupt, not corrupt, that's not even the point, you know? The corruption is going to disappear in Afghanistan because the Afghan – the Afghan state is going to disappear, so I'm not even sure that corruption is long-term problem.

[00:15:24]

What you're seeing right now is Karzai, if you compare to 2005 or '06, has less and less influence in what is happening in the provinces. For example, you have in Mazar-i-Sharif, you have a local governor who set it up. It was quite independent from Kabul. I'm not sure, even, he wants to talk on the phone to Karzai, you know.

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

Technically, he has been appointed by Karzai, but he's totally autonomous. And you have that more and more everywhere. Karzai is not in control of what is happening in Kandahar. His family, yes, but as a president, he is not in control. So that's the real story. It's the disintegration of the state.

And it's going through the local district. More and more local district, the Taliban are in charge or the government is just here very symbolically and they make a deal with the Taliban to avoid to be – the place to be taken by the Taliban. So that's the real problem, no state structure.

MS. BUMILLER: Okay, so what is the solution? You're the president. You're President Obama. What do you do about this?

[00:16:34]

MR. DORRONSORO: I'm not President Obama. (Laughter.)

MS. BUMILLER: Let's say you were. What's the solution here?

MR. DORRONSORO: I think, until two years ago, it was possible to play the military in the sense that it was possible to reorganize the military in the sense that you had to protect the cities – the cities and the main roads. That was probably the right strategy.

It was more or less Soviet-inspired strategy and I think the Soviets had full – were much better than us about thinking the war in Afghanistan because their decision process was different, because they had more expert or they were using more the experts they have. I do not know. They are much better in this way. So I think this kind of strategy could have worked two years ago.

Right now, the more we fight, the more we are losing ground. So the idea that the situation is going to be better, that we have casualties, so it's a good sign. All that is – it's Washingtonian politics. It's nothing to do with what's happening on the ground. The perceptions are shifting very quickly now for all the Afghans and for all Afghanistan experts in the sense that the war is lost.

The Americans have lost the war; the coalition has lost the war. So it's very clear on the ground. Nobody's thinking that the situation is going to be better next year. So to answer your question, what we need to do is to start negotiating now because if we wait, it's going to be worse. At some point, the Taliban are going to say, okay, what's – why should we negotiate? You've lost everything.

[00:18:15]

What's going to happen next year when the Canadians will be out? The Dutch almost out? When the Polish are saying that they will be out of Afghanistan in two, three years? When the Germans are thinking a lot about that? (Chuckles.) When the British said 2015? We are losing ground and the problem is that next year, Obama will have these two choices, basically, to buttresses. Or it could be in this situation, where he would have to send reinforcements in Afghanistan, just to stop the Taliban from taking cities or towns, he will have to send reinforcement.

MS. BUMILLER: Okay, well, here's the question. As you know, the defense secretary, Robert Gates, has said repeatedly recently that this is not the right time to start negotiating with the Taliban. We need to inflict more

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

losses on them. So from your point of view, what is the incentive for the Taliban to negotiate with the U.S. right now?

MR. DORRONSORO: I mean, there is just one incentive right now or maybe two. First incentive is that they are taking casualties, especially the middle rank of the Taliban organization is taking a lot of casualties. The Special Ops are killing a lot of Taliban, so a few hundred, maybe 500, 600, 1,000, we don't know. But a lot of people are killed. So for their personal security, some people may think in the organization, it's time to negotiate just to survive. But I don't think it's a very strong argument.

[00:19:52]

The second argument, which is, actually, the good argument, is that the Pakistani military is in control of the Taliban leadership. And they want negotiation. They don't want Afghanistan to become, again, a rogue state. They want Afghanistan to be a normal state – to push their strategy to advantage in Afghanistan. So they need negotiation.

They will put pressure on the Taliban leadership to have negotiation. And they can't do it right now because they are relatively in control. We have seen in February – you remember the number two of the Taliban organization was arrested. Why? Because Baradar wanted direct negotiation with Karzai. More or less he had contact with Karzai.

And so the Pakistan military said, no. No way. We are not going to let you negotiate directly with Karzai. They put him in jail – you know. It was not exactly a big success of the U.S. government. It was just the way of disciplining the Taliban movement. The ISI was putting the Taliban back in their control – that was it. So if they can do that, most probably can force the Taliban to negotiate.

MS. BUMILLER: Okay. So what does a – what does Afghanistan look like then? And say this happens, there's negotiations. What does it look like in three years?

MR. DORRONSORO: The intermediary step is to have a ceasefire. If you have a ceasefire, people can relax a little. We can have the Taliban leadership back in Afghanistan under some kind of deal with the U.N., for example. And then the Pakistanis will have less influence on the Taliban industry, which is basically a good thing after the start of the negotiation.

[00:21:40]

And then we can opt for a kind of local deal in Afghanistan, coalition government. It's going to be a Shariah-oriented state, but it's already the case. And specific groups, minorities, women and so on will lose a lot, of course, just to be honest about it. But it's probably, to a certain extent, manageable, and it can be some kind of arrangement here.

The second thing is that there must be a deal. It must be an international deal with – especially with the U.N., but India, also, could be part of the deal. But the fact that Afghanistan is not going to be, again, a base for al-Qaeda, or Lashkar-e-Taiba, or all the groups, radical groups – (inaudible). That's the key-point, actually, for us – for westerners.

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

And it could work if the Taliban are part of a coalition government, because the Taliban are the only ones who can deliver the security on the border. This border will never be secure if we don't have a deal with the Taliban. That's why Ambassador Blackwell's idea that we should just, basically, work with the north of Afghanistan is a little strange, to stay polite, because if we support the people in the north we are supporting people who cannot deliver what we need.

We need security here. And as far as I know, the al-Qaeda is not going to have bases in the north of Afghanistan. So it's very strange.

MS. BUMILLER: So and what – this is the age old question – what is to prevent, tell us, the Taliban from working again with al-Qaeda the way it was occurring back in 2001?

MR. DORRONSORO: Well, first, I think they have learned that it could be very costly to work with al-Qaeda. And I don't think they are – the Taliban are basically a nationalist movement. They don't have big – they don't want to attack western countries, it's not on their agenda. You know, their agenda is to have an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

[00:23:58]

And the second thing is, if we have a coalition government, it could be part of the subsidization of Afghanistan, the sense that the Taliban are part of something that is larger than them. And after a few years, if there is enough money – and there could be enough money, quickly, in Afghanistan – you can have a situation where the Taliban have some clear interest, personal interest, in the system.

So they will not destroy the system because they will have what happened in the end of the '90s basically. The Taliban want international recognition. They were – I mean, it was their main objective. So they said, okay, we want international recognition, so we are going to stop all the opium cultivation. And they did it, actually, it worked. But we are not interested – we are focused on al-Qaeda.

[00:24:49]

At that point, Mullah Omar and part of the Taliban leadership were not very clear about al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda was there before the Taliban arrived. And their bases were there in the east in '95 before the Taliban arrived in this area. So you know, it was a kind of process where nobody trusted nobody, and the Taliban were convinced – I mean, some of the Taliban were convinced that in the end there will never be international recognition, and so on. So if we can have an international negotiation, it can work. I think it can work.

MS. BUMILLER: Let me just ask one more question before I turn it over to the audience. Going back to 200, if the Bush administration – this is again – I'd be curious to hear what you have to say to this – if the Bush administration had stayed focused on Afghanistan, would it be a different place today?

Was there any hope – I mean this is such a difficult country, historically, for invaders. Has – would it be different today if there had been a sustained focus Afghanistan in terms of troops and attention?

MR. DORRONSORO: It's, to say the least, a complex question. I would say that there were a few moments where the right decision could have changed the map. Especially in 2002, negotiation with the Taliban in the form of a general amnesty and putting them back in the system could have worked. That's one thing.

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

Second thing – and it’s the opposite, but it could have worked also. Full pressure on Pakistan in 2002, 2003 could have worked, because in 2002, 2003 it was possible to speak to Musharraf and say, okay, we do not accept that Mullah Omar is in Quetta. We do not accept. It was credible in 2002 because, I mean, there was something going on. So this will – at least that’s two things.

Another thing, but it’s more complex, is the fact that most of the people are saying it’s because of Iraq. And that’s the traditional – we are losing in Afghanistan because we put too much resources there. But it’s a little bit different than that. If you read the people in charge at that time – Gen. Barno, for example, was in charge until the end of 2005, I remember well.

These people were saying, there is no Taliban in Afghanistan, we have won the war. They were unable to read their own report. What we have seen with Wikileaks is that in 2003, 2004, 2005, the deterioration of the situation – (inaudible) – was very quick.

[00:27:21]

And at the same time – and that’s a real question – the official line of the U.S. military was: Well, everything is fine. The Taliban has basically disappeared. You say, do you find that again and again? So there’s two hypotheses here.

First, they did not understand what’s going on. So it’s bad for the U.S. military leadership is they just did not see what was under their nose. The second hypothesis is that there was political pressure, and the Bush administration wanted things to go okay in Afghanistan because they wanted to fight in Iraq.

In this case, it’s also a problem, an internal problem. So I would say here we have a primary -- I have no clear answer – but the fact that people did not recognize the fact on the ground in 2004 and ’05 is a key element of the defeat. And to answer your question: It could have been another turning point.

And the last one is, of course, the surge. The idea that sending more troops here was going to change the dynamic of the war was the last nail in the coffin. It was the last mistake. So after that, it’s over. There is no military solution.

[00:28:32]

MS. BUMILLER: Okay. On that bright note – (chuckles) – Barbara.

Q: Do I just talk in here?

MS. BUMILLER: Yeah, no I –

Q: I know they are recording.

MS. BUMILLER: Oh, okay, yeah, wait for the microphone.

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

Q: Barbara Slavin. Thank you. Gilles, what is to prevent Afghanistan from simply going back into another civil war? There are warlords who have private militias who are still around, have been preparing for the day when the U.S. leaves. You know, why won't it just simply dissolve again into that kind of chaos?

MR. DORRONSORO: First, I was describing the best-case scenario. I'm not sure it was totally clear. But it was the best-case scenario, and it was still not very okay. There is one clear difference between the '90s and now is that in the '90s, you had a very powerful warlord or commander, whatever, in the north. Massoud was here, he was – I mean, he was a very good organizer. You know, he was – he had a great charisma and prestige in the north. You had Dustum, who is still around here, but war criminal, clearly unstable psychologically, but quite powerful sub-militarily. You had the Hazara in the center at that time, at least that was that a more-or-less coherent party, and then you had the Taliban in the south.

[00:30:07]

So – and plus – (inaudible) – until 1995. So you are – the regionalization of the war was very strong. Well, you don't have this map today. Today, you have here – you have Taliban. There's no other political force than the Taliban. The other here are very divided today. Some are beginning to make deals with the Taliban.

[00:03:30]

And in the north, here you have all Taliban or very local groups. It's – (inaudible) – it's nothing. It's not a – you know. So you cannot have the same kind of civil war. It's impossible, because there is nobody to fight with. If we are out, the Taliban are in and in very quickly – a few months maximum.

So that's why, that's another reason why the idea that we can build something in the north against the Taliban in the south is exactly the wrong idea, because the north is politically nothing.

MS. BUMILLER: Yes, in the front row here.

Q: To what extent do you expect Afghanistan's neighbors – as your scenario unfolds – to meddle, as they did in the '90s?

MR. DORRONSORO: It's – sorry?

MS. BUMILLER: I'm sure India. You're talking about India.

MR. DORRONSORO: Yeah. I was thinking about India, of course.

[00:31:37]

Q: Iran and some of the Central Asian powers. I'm thinking, again, back to the '90s.

MR. DORRONSORO: It's complicated, because it depends on the analysis. I would say that Iran is, mostly, not a problem, because the Iranians are very worried about what's going on in Afghanistan. They are happy because the coalition is failing, but they don't want the Taliban back. At the same time they know that it's most likely the Taliban will be back in the system, so they are giving money to Karzai, they are giving to money to – (inaudible) – they are giving some kind of help to the Taliban. You know, so, they have no strong political – they have strong

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

political interest but no clear strategy, I would say. So they are not really a problem and they are not going to be the main spoiler in this system.

The problem is mostly Pakistan and India. Russians, I think they will stay a bit out. Pakistan and Russia. India is, basically, worried about not only, of course, Afghanistan but Pakistan. And if they have a second Mumbai, what is going to be the answer? And it's not totally impossible.

So they could have two strategies. Basically, they could accept the fact that the Taliban are back. And they could try to make a deal with the Taliban because the Taliban do not like the Pakistanis at all. The Taliban has very bad relationship with the Pakistani Army. Right now they are obliged to work together because, okay, they have the same interest. But the day Mullah Omar is back in Kandahar, trust me, the relationship between the Pakistan military is going to be bad.

So the Indians can wait and make – it could make a deal with Afghanistan after accepting the Taliban back. Or they could try the other strategy, which is giving money to the people in the north. If they do that, it's suicidal because, again, they will give money and power to people who cannot deliver what India wants, means the security in this area. So it's always the same thing, you know.

But it's quite possible that India is going to do that. I do not know right now because the moment is not – I mean, it's not very clear in the negotiation – I'm not officially – (inaudible) – start and we don't know really. But there's two strategies. One is, I think, suicidal. One, working with the Taliban could be the right one in the long run.

[00:34:13]

And Pakistan is in – it's a total dead-end for Pakistan. If the Taliban are back in power in Kabul they will have a bad relationship with Pakistan. That's clear. They did not recognize that their own line (ph) when they were in power. They don't accept – they did not accept very easily the fact that the number two of the Taliban was arrested by the ISI because it was trying to deal with Karzai.

So there is a strong resentment against the Pakistan army in the Taliban. Today they are in Kabul. It's clear they will be totally anti-Pakistan. And so, not easy for the Pakistan military. They have won the war, but they cannot translate this military victory in the kind of real advantage on the ground in Afghanistan.

Plus the fact that you are going to have feedback, and now the problem is— in Pakistan is that you have a kind of low-level civil war in all the western part of Pakistan, and it's becoming a major problem. So for Pakistan, I mean, they have lost, basically. It's a disastrous victory for Pakistan.

MS. BUMILLER: Front row here. Just pass it around, right – (chuckles).

[00:35:28]

Q: Could Karzai and the Taliban and Pakistan make a deal independently of the United States? Is the United States pressuring Pakistan to break with the Taliban or to bring the Taliban to the table? And does Karzai have a political constituency, especially after these recent elections for Parliament, that could support a deal that he might make with the Taliban? You know, he seemed to be turning toward Pakistan over the last few months and

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

firing these security officials that were anti-Pakistan and so forth. It seems like the United States is trying to wreck that strategy as opposed to support it.

MR. DORRONSORO: It's complicated. There is -- I'm not even sure there is one U.S. strategy. It seems to be complex, at least. I see two problems here. The first problem is that, basically, Karzai has no political, social support in Afghanistan. He is alone. This guy is alone, you know. He has his family support, maybe part of some tribes in Kandahar, but it's very limited. Basically Kandahar is a Taliban city.

He has lost his support in the north, as you said, because he fired people who were, let's say, punchy and very much opposed to the Pakistani. So he's lost support in the north. The Hazara are not working very much with Karzai anymore.

So Karzai is -- this guy is alone, basically. He has no real power. And the problem -- to start negotiation with Karzai -- Karzai doesn't represent much in Afghanistan. He's the guy in Kabul? So what? The main problem is not that the Taliban do not want a negotiation, but you put -- who is going to be on the other side of the table? You put the Taliban here. Who is going to be on the other side?

And that's complicated. Karzai is too weak. Then you have to go to regional power or ethnic, religious groups like the Hazara. You have to put the Hazara somewhere. You have put, maybe, somebody like -- (inaudible) -- who said he was essentially wanting negotiation of the Taliban.

[00:37:47]

You have to put -- (inaudible) -- away. And probably other people you can find in there. But the problem is that the Taliban are the only organized political force in Afghanistan today. That's the main problem of the negotiation. So that's one thing.

The second thing is that the U.S. policy vis-à-vis Pakistan is difficult to explain concretely. Since 2001, the Pakistanis are clearly supporting the Taliban, okay. And the U.S. government is giving every year a few billion dollars which is going partially to the army, the army which is supporting the Taliban, the Taliban who are killing American soldier.

[00:38:38]

So it's a masterpiece of political and diplomatic work for the Pakistani government, or the Pakistani army. But from Washington, why is the U.S. government doing that? It doesn't make sense, really. So it's very strange -- and so first thing.

The second thing is that the idea that you have to put pressure on the Pakistani government so you are going to put pressure on the Taliban is yesterday's story. It doesn't make sense today. The war is lost in Afghanistan. We have to negotiate. The one people that can put pressure on the Taliban to negotiate is the Pakistani Army.

So on the contrary we should be very happy that somebody has leverage on the Taliban to put them on the negotiation table, because the idea that you are going to weaken the Taliban to such a point that they will be obliged to accept negotiation when the old border here is totally open to the Taliban -- because nobody is trying to stop them on the Pakistani side.

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

The idea that you can win against – (inaudible) – with such a sanctuary is – I mean, doesn't make sense in military story. I've never seen something like that. It is very strange that people can speak about that seriously, actually. So that's the second problem. We should – we should put the Pakistani army in the loop because they are the only one who can deliver with the Taliban.

MS. BUMILLER: Yeah, I'm working my way back, yes, this man – gentleman here in the red shirt.

Q: I've heard many students of this crisis say that the real reason that we're in Afghanistan is not to deny sanctuary to al-Qaeda, but to prevent a radical Islamic regime from cropping up on the border of Pakistan. Pakistan is our main trouble. Now, I don't know whether you really agree with that, but you have said that, first, that the Pakistan military and ISI can control the Taliban if they want. At least I understand you to say that.

My question is, if, in fact, there's a Taliban victory in Afghanistan, can the Pakistani military and ISI control them? Or will they become a real threat to the state of Pakistan? I'd like both of you to comment on this, if you would.

[00:41:08]

MS. BUMILLER: (Chuckles.) The question is, can the Pakistani military –

MR. DORRONSORO: You want me to answer first?

MS. BUMILLER: Yeah. (Laughter.) Right.

Q: Not a sanctuary, but to prevent an Islamic regime cropping up on the border of Pakistan, destabilizing the Pakistani state. So if Afghanistan does fall under the Taliban, is that a threat to the integrity of Pakistan?

MS. BUMILLER: That's a good question. I don't know the answer to that.

MR. DORRONSORO: Want me to –

Q: Or can –

MS. BUMILLER: Do you have an answer to that? I don't know.

MR. DORRONSORO: There are things we know, things we don't know, the known and the unknown. So – (chuckles) – I'm sorry about that. What seems to be the rule here is that we know that the Taliban are obliged to work with the Pakistani army. Civilians are out of the picture because they are in control – the ISI is in control of the Taliban leadership in Pakistan.

[00:42:09]

Very concretely, Mullah Omar is in a house somewhere or maybe even on a Pakistani military base somewhere. And he has no access to the outside world without the control of the ISI. Let's be clear about that, now, okay? So it's a direct control on the Taliban leadership. So when I say they can put pressure, they can put pressure.

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

And if somebody disagrees, they can send him to the CIA, which is not a very good thing for a Taliban leader, okay? So it's a direct pressure, we know that. That's what they did with Baradar. Baradar was number two of the Taliban. So it was quite – somebody quite important. So that's what we know.

Second thing, we can guess and it's very likely that the Taliban, when they will be back in Kabul, the first thing they will do is to cut the relationship with the Pakistani army and they will have – the duration is going to be tense, but then you have two solutions.

[00:43:15]

The Taliban are back in Kabul with a coalition government – in a coalition government, okay? So they have international recognition and they want money to rebuild the country. They want to make deals so they can work with India. They can work with Russia. They work to everybody.

MS. BUMILLER: Will they work with us?

MR. DORRONSORO: Yeah, of course.

MS. BUMILLER: Will we work with them?

MR. DORRONSORO: That is another question. But the Taliban will be perfectly ready to make commercial deals with everybody. Look, Vietnam, after all, I mean it's not very different. So you have this – this hypothesis. In this case, the more we work with the Taliban, the more we are giving international recognition to the Taliban, the less the Taliban will work with the Pakistani army and with jihadist group. They will have what they want. They want to be a state, so they will be a state. (Inaudible.)

[00:44:07]

The second hypothesis is the Taliban are back, one way or another, in Afghanistan and we don't recognize them. We put them in a corner, basically, so they are in control, for example, of the south, but not the north and not the capital. You know this kind of situation where it's kind of civil war.

In this case, the Taliban have no problem. They will work with al-Qaeda. They will work with other jihadist groups on the border and then you will have a feedback effect on Pakistan that's going to be terrible. That's the two scenario I see, yeah. So depends how they are back in Afghanistan, basically.

MS. BUMILLER: Yes. The gentleman here in the blue suit.

Q: I agree with you, Gilles, in terms of sort of your topmost perspective that when a strategic error has been made, it stays made and it continues to have effects. And so my question is much more tertiary than that. But you haven't talked about the Afghan army at all. And at a minimum, there are, you know, some number of people in six figures and they're in uniforms and they're taking up space someplace.

And so could you talk about where they are geographically, what duties they are performing to the degree they're performing any duties, to what degree there is an embryonic officer corps, those kinds of basic questions.

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

MS. BUMILLER: I can answer a bit of that too because I with them last week. Yeah, go ahead, and I'll then take some of it.

MR. DORRONSORO: Yeah, I will say that the Afghan National Army is important, but not for the reason people think it is important. People think that the Afghan National Army is going to replace the coalition in the next few years and you know, you have the Afghan-ization of the security, so we withdraw, we put the Afghan army and after a few years in Shala, we are out of the country.

[00:46:09]

That's a dream, you know, the idea that the Afghan National Army is going to stop the Taliban somewhere is a joke. But it doesn't mean that first, we should not finance the Afghan National Army and it doesn't mean that it's useless, not at all. The Afghan National Army is part of the political deal.

If there is a coalition government, you need structure. You need to say to the Taliban [46:32], okay, you can join the Afghan National Army. You can also say, okay, it's a small army, but it's army that can defend the city. If somebody wants to make a coup, for example, there is still the Afghan National Army to stop, to put a cost – maybe it's not going to stop it or anything, but there is a cost, you know.

And I think that's why it's very important because strangely enough, the Afghan National Army is still relatively popular in Afghanistan, even in the south. Even if it's Pashtun, it is Uzbek in the south, there is still the fact that it's the national army. So it's very important, but for not the fighting. It's important for the negotiation, actually. It's part of the stabilization of the country.

[00:47:12]

MS. BUMILLER: I can tell you that, you know, in the – with the Marines in Helmand and also it's true in Kandahar, every unit is paired with the Afghan army and Gilles is right. The ANA is somewhat – is popular in Afghanistan and it's a long way away, believe me, from being able to take this on itself.

It's, you know, going on patrol with Marines and Afghan army soldiers is nerve-wracking because you never know where the Afghan army is going to shoot. (Laughter.) You can't, you know, I mean – it's just not –

MR. DORRONSORO: Stay behind.

MS. BUMILLER: Yeah, yeah, stay behind them. And they – they, you know, they're not disciplined. There's a drug problem. You can smell the marijuana at some of these bases, you know. It's just part of the culture. But you know, they're not terrible.

You know, and they do have the general respect of the population and you know, last week in Marja, they guarded, you know, the outside of polling places and the Marines were very pleased Marja that at least no polling place was directly attacked. And so the other – the bigger problem, of course, is the Afghan police and they are very corrupt and they are not respected and the U.S. military is trying very hard, but that is a real problem because they are the ones who have to keep control at the local level.

And there's a new – they're trying a new thing, the ANCOP, the Afghan National Civil Order Police, kind of like a national guard. They're trying to do that, but they've got big problems with the police in terms of drug abuse,

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

in terms of discipline. That's a long, long way to go. So Gilles is right. There's no way the Army or the police could take over anytime soon.

[00:48:50]

MR. DORRONSORO: They're sure in Laghman province. Laghman is not – it's the Taliban everywhere, but it's not the worst place in Afghanistan. They've tried Afghan National Army tried an operation alone against a few commanders in the north. They got probably 50 casualties, I think, total disaster.

MS. BUMILLER: In terms of numbers, there's, I think, about 140 (thousand), 150,000 in the Afghan army and you get all these numbers from ISAF saying we now have so many trained and stuff. But you know, what does that mean? We went through that with Iraq, so.

MR. DORRONSORO: And just another thing. They can be relatively good if it's static defense, you know? That's where you should use them, you know, to defend – because they are fighting for their life, basically, so I mean they are bitter and what we have seen inside the city of Kabul recently is you see that it's doable.

[00:49:44]

That's why I suggested two years ago, if I remember clearly, the idea that you secure the cities and from there, you build something. It's working. I mean in Kabul, it's working. It's working well. I mean it's – because it's relatively simple. If people don't take a lot of risk, they are well-protected. And, you know, to do what the U.S. Marines are doing in this after you go out in the – I mean you need to be really proficient, no?

MS. BUMILLER: Need to be what?

MR. DORRONSORO: Really proficient, no? I mean it's very –

MS. BUMILLER: Very hard.

MR. DORRONSORO: It's very hard, you know. (Chuckles.)

MS. BUMILLER: It's very hard.

MR. DORRONSORO: Because you are sure that you are going to be fired at. And why – I mean.

MS. BUMILLER: I was just – (inaudible) – that we were in – the – (inaudible) – we were in Marja at one of the bazaars the night before the election with the Marines. And the streets were deserted. You know, it was eight or 9 o' clock at night. And this pickup truck rumbled by with a lot of raggedy guys with headbands and rifles sitting up, and lots of riding on the truck, and they were making lots of noise and they were yelling and screaming.

And I said, who's that? And they said, oh, that's the Afghan police. (Laughter.) I said, great. You know, they are going to be guarding the polling stations tomorrow. So you know, talking about not looking professional or behaving in a professional way.

So you know, and they get – I've been on other patrols, like in May. The Afghan Army gets tired, you know, the Marines are going and they get tired and they want to take a break. You know, it's their country. It's a whole

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

different culture. Any – there's some questions in the back there – the gentleman in the far back. We have time for about two more questions.

[00:51:20]

Q: John Bacon (sp). Thank you both very much. I'm asking about strategies down in Helmand and Kandahar area. I hear there's a lot of emphasis on counter-narcotics. To what extent is the opium cultivation and drug smuggling a problem? Should it be a, sort of, tactical or operational focus of coalition forces down there?

MS. BUMILLER: Well, I can answer that quickly, and then I'm sure you have a larger picture answer. But I can tell you that in Helmand, certainly, the U.S. – you probably know this – made the decision not to destroy the opium crop, because why go in and destroy a farmer's livelihood, and, you know, completely anger somebody you are trying to befriend?

So it was close to a year ago, six months ago they made the decision no longer to destroy the opium crop. They are trying now to get farmers to grow something else besides poppy. There's – this planting season is starting right now. A defense official told me a couple of weeks ago that they are hoping that in Marja that they will cut the planting of opium by – or poppy by 50 percent. That's the goal. But he said, realistically, that's not going to happen – if we cut it by 25 percent that would be helpful.

[00:52:35]

But as you well know that there is such money to be made with opium. And it's very hard to offer incentives, you know, with wheat and other things the U.S. would prefer they grow. So right now, there is a – there's a standoff.

Q: If I could follow up a minute. I'm asking more about interdiction operations.

MS. BUMILLER: Interdiction.

Q: Some of that has been in focus after, maybe, the second – (inaudible; cross talk)

MS. BUMILLER: You mean interdiction of the drugs?

Q: (Off mike; inaudible) – that's correct – (off mike; inaudible).

MS. BUMILLER: Yeah. I don't know very much about that. I know there has been some – I don't – that would be, you know, special force. That would be other people. I don't know very much about that, how much that is going on. I know it's some. Do you?

MR. DORRONSORO: Yeah. I mean, there is a problem here because, on the one hand, the idea is that you do not put pressure on the local farmer because, okay, he's doing opium but that's life, and okay, you want to be friendly. On the other hand you say, we are going to strike against all the smuggling networks, okay.

[00:53:38]

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

But if you are going to the end of the logic: When you cannot sell your opium, basically, it's the end of the opium cultivation. So the idea that you can strictly differentiate between smuggling, a smugglers-targeting operation and anti-cultivation operation is kind of tricky, you know. And what's happening in Helmand is that people have more difficulty to cultivate and to sell.

In other terms: Before the beginning of the big operation in Marja, the people was living economically relatively well, and there was peace because the Taliban were in charge. So there was justice and people were basically happy. The Taliban were popular in Marja.

Right now it's a war. It's difficult. There are IEDs everywhere. And there is a lot of economic pressure, because when you are targeting the smugglers, of course you are targeting, actually, the people who are selling and who are cultivating. So there is a contradiction here.

And I think it's a contradiction that is born from the fact that it's a lot of negotiation in Washington between the people who are anti-narcotics and the people who are in the counterinsurgency. And at the end, the bureaucratic decision was, okay, we kill the smugglers but we don't kill the farmers.

And that's a bureaucratic compromise, that intellectually doesn't work very well, plus the fact that if you are going to – against the smugglers, really, you are very – very quickly you'll find in the Afghan official the idea that the Taliban are dependent on narcotics to fight the war in Afghanistan is just strange. It doesn't work like that.

MS. BUMILLER: Okay, last question, back there? The gentleman back there next to the last guy who asked a question.

[00:55:30]

Q: Thank you. Sir, I just have a question, if you could talk more on the fractionalization of the Afghan Taliban. I feel like sometimes we overstate how much the Pakistan army can deliver. We know that a close affiliation with the Haqqani network, which is just one of many groups, as you know, in the Afghan Taliban, and we know if there have been scores of shadow governors killed in Afghanistan, and people who are there probably have never met Mullah Omar, probably have no personal connection to him. He's probably, as you said, isolated.

So when the Pakistan army comes in and says, oh, you know, we can deliver the Afghan Taliban, I mean, how much – how many of them do you think they can deliver? And I don't mean the number or percentage, but I mean, would you say there are critical parts of the insurgency that are out of the control of the Pakistan army? Thank you.

MR. DORRONSORO: First, I don't share your analysis, basically, but let's say you're right, because even if we make a deal with the Pakistani army and say, okay, let's make the ceasefire, whatever, and we discover that part of the Taliban are going to respect the ceasefire and part are not going to respect the ceasefire. It's a major victory for the coalition. It's a major victory for the coalition. If you have the Haqqani network respecting the ceasefire and the people in Quetta and in Kandahar not respecting the ceasefire, it's a major advantage for the coalition, of course.

[00:57:02]

So you can move more freely, you can do plenty of things. So okay, so it's not an argument against starting the negotiation. That's for my first answer. Second answer, I don't think it's true, because I tend to think that we

Transcript Not Checked Against Delivery

have few reliable information on the way the Taliban are working inside. I am not entirely convinced by all the reports that have been leaked, and it doesn't sound very, very, very – what do we know on the ground?

First, the Taliban do not fight between themselves. I don't know if they are so coherent or incoherent, but what I can tell you, if one of the Taliban are appointing a shadow governor somewhere, there is not another shadow governor. So they have a structure, because they have a shadow governor, they have a district governor, they have a judge, and you'd never have a fight – or maybe somewhere, somebody. You know, basically, you are dealing with people who are able to build a national organization, that's one thing.

Second thing, how do you explain the nationalization – the dynamic of the war? If the Taliban are this whole fragmented group, how do you explain that in 2002 from Quetta, people were going from Quetta to Lowgar, and that's very approximate, but Lowgar and Wardak here, to come to the jihad? Who are these people? How do you explain that you have logistical networks going from here to the north? How do you explain that? How do you explain that today, somebody in Quetta is saying, okay, we are going to put pressure for the election, you have 450 or 500 attacks, at least that's what NATO said.

So what is on the ground, where are the proof that the Taliban are divided? The idea that the Haqqani network is different from the Taliban, where is the proof? Or more exactly, what do you see on the ground that shows that these groups are not working the same way? So to go back to the first question, let's try a ceasefire. We'll see if the Taliban are divided or not, but so far on the ground, the major mistake of the coalition has been to underestimate the Taliban. They have a national strategy, they are pushing everywhere where there are weaknesses, and they are not fighting each other, so for me it's a ground movement.

MS. BUMILLER: Okay, thank you for coming, I'm sure if you wanted to come up and talk afterward we can do that, but thank you very much for coming, and thank you, Gilles.

MR. DORRONSORO: Thank you, Elizabeth. (Applause.)

(END)