



SENATOR JOHN MCCAIN ON AFGHANISTAN

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WELCOME/MODERATOR:

Jessica Mathews,

President

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

SPEAKER:

Senator John McCain (R-AZ)

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JESSICA MATHEWS: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. I'm Jessica Mathews, president of the Carnegie Endowment. And thank you for joining us for this discussion of the next phases of America's longest war.

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ISAF today has 130,000 troops on the ground, 90,000 of them American. Over the next two years, these numbers are going to decline dramatically. And in late 2014, if current plans hold – big if – the security transition to Afghan control will be complete. But this war will not end in victory. In the best case, the outcome will be something far messier. And notwithstanding the temptation to think about other things as the troop numbers decline, we owe it to those who have served and are serving there to continue to care and to continue to strive for the wisest achievable policies.

There have been some recent signs of progress in the transfer of prisoners to Afghan control and the handover of oversight of night raids to Afghan forces so that a strategic partnership between Washington and Kabul may finally be within reach. But enormous challenges remain. The Afghan government is still weak and riddled with systemic corruption. Insurgents continue to find sanctuary across the border in Pakistan. And Kabul remains heavily dependent on outside assistance and, for the foreseeable future, even for the core state function of paying for its own security forces.

And so critical questions remain. What will NATO's role be? What sort of Afghanistan will we be leaving behind? What are the consequences of various outcomes for American and allied security? And what role should the United States play after 2014? Here to suggest some answers is one of the most serious students of American foreign policy and national security in this city for many decades. Senator John McCain has served his country with deepest distinction, including more than five years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam and 30 years in the United States Congress.

I recognize that by linking those I don't mean to suggest those are comparable levels of unpleasantness. (Laughter.)

SENATOR JOHN MCCAIN (R-AZ): In Hanoi, I knew who the enemy was. (Laughter.)

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MS. MATHEWS: He has made his mark on a range of national issues, from earmarks and campaign finance reform to the use of torture, never hesitating to take on the most sensitive issues and never hesitating to follow where his own convictions take him. A relentless traveler to hotspots around the globe, he has just returned from the Turkish-Syrian border, he has played an important role in shaping American thinking over Afghanistan, Iraq, detainee policy and the U.S. response to the Arab Awakening.

On a lighter note, he is also the most popular member of Congress on Twitter, with more than 1.7 million followers.

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AUDIENCE MEMBER: Wow.

MS. MATHEWS: Wow, indeed – outpacing Tim Tebow and Donald Trump, among others. (Laughter.) But on a serious note, it gives me great pleasure and honor to welcome Senator McCain to Carnegie to share his thoughts on the future of Afghanistan. (Applause.)

[00:03:30]

SEN. MCCAIN: Thank you, Jessica, for that generous introduction, for your leadership of this outstanding institution, and it's good to see old friends and enemies here today. (Laughter.) The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace remains a first-rate source of policy analysis and practical guidance on all of the major international issues of the day. And I continue to rely on the advice and counsel of many Carnegie scholars, including my friend Ashley Tellis here today, and many others.

Thank you for giving me opportunity to speak about Afghanistan and its run-up to the NATO summit in Chicago next month. And I look forward to your questions or comments or insults following my remarks. (Scattered laughter.) A friend commented to me yesterday that the international community has so many summits nowadays it's beginning to resemble a mountain range. That may be true, but this is nonetheless a vital moment to focus on NATO's mission in Afghanistan.

We are approaching the end-game of what has already been, as Jessica mentioned, a long war. And not surprisingly, the American people are very tired of this burden. The war weariness has only been exacerbated in the last few days by a series of headline-grabbing setbacks in Afghanistan – the latest being the coordinated and terrorist attacks in Kabul and other Afghan cities earlier this week. But while events like these are unfortunate, none of them change the vital U.S. national security interests at stake in Afghanistan, nor do they mean that the war is lost. It is not.

There's still a realistic path to success if the right decisions are made in the months ahead. This gives added importance to the upcoming NATO summit. We must view this meeting as a strategic opportunity to recast our entire involvement in Afghanistan, to recommit ourselves in the alliance not merely to leaving Afghanistan, but to succeeding there.

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This requires a clear understanding of what is at stake and what the cost will be to all of us if we fail. More than a decade after the attacks of September 11th 2001, we fight in Afghanistan today for the very same reason that first led us there. What happens in Afghanistan directly impacts our security at home.

We abandoned Afghanistan in the 1990s and the result, as you all know, was a fanatical regime that tyrannized the Afghan people, especially women, used its territory as a base for global terrorist attacks. And if we quit Afghanistan again and abandon the millions of Afghans who have risked everything to be our allies in the hopes of succeeding together,

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Afghanistan will again become a safe haven for terrorists and a nightmare for the Afghan people. It does not have to be this way.

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Significant military progress has been made in Afghanistan, progress that I have witnessed over repeated visits. Four years ago, the Taliban dominated southern Afghanistan and our coalition lacked both the resources and the strategy necessary to break their momentum. Today that situation is reversed. I have walked through busy villages, bustling marketplaces in parts of Kandahar and Helmand that were entirely off limits just a few years ago.

Similarly, the training of the Afghan national security forces, which was under-resourced and disorganized four years ago, has been completely overhauled. Growing numbers of Afghan units are increasingly capable of leading the fight. Indeed, it was Afghan forces that beat back the attackers and restored security in Kabul and other cities this week with minimal international assistance.

Yes, the despicable actions of a few Afghan soldiers, who turned their weapons on our forces, recently captured our attention and our sympathy. But that must not cause us to overlook the fact that there are literally hundreds of thousands of patriotic Afghans who will fight – who are faithfully in this fight with our troops and increasingly taking the lead for it. They are wounded and killed in greater numbers than our forces, and that should give us hope that our common goal, an Afghanistan that is secure – can secure itself, govern itself and sustain its own progress, remains achievable over time.

While these tactical gains are undeniable, unfortunately our efforts continue to be undermined at the strategic level by the perception that America is planning to abandon Afghanistan once again, a perception that the administration has exacerbated through its fixation on leaving Afghanistan and by a series of counterproductive decisions they have taken to accelerate that withdrawal.

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First, in December 2010, the president provided his military commanders with a smaller surge of forces than they recommended and announced a date certain to begin withdrawing our troops the following year. Our commanders had planned to confront the insurgency in southern and eastern Afghanistan simultaneously. However, the smaller surge forced them to tackle the insurgency sequentially, first in the south, then in the east. This made the war longer.

The president then overruled his commanders again in July of last year, choosing to withdraw the full surge earlier than the military commanders recommended. After the initial decision on troop levels (to lengthen/lengthened ?) the campaign, this decision denied our commanders the full combat power they had wanted to employ against the Haqqani network in eastern Afghanistan during the coming fighting season.

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Our military leaders have testified to Congress that none of them recommended this course of action, and that it has only increased the risk to our mission.

In addition, the administration is now planning to cut the end strength of the Afghan national security forces from 352,000 to 230,000. The rationale offered is that the larger number is a surge force, and it can be drawn down to the lower number in a matter of years after 2014. That's a hard argument to swallow from a military standpoint. And the Afghan defense minister has been critical of it in those terms. Furthermore, how can it make sense to begin laying off 120,000 well-trained Afghan combat veterans in 2014 and sending them into what will surely be a dim job market? We saw a similar movie before in Iraq, and it didn't end well.

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Finally, the administration continues to pursue a reconciliation plan with the Taliban that rests on the flawed assumption that real reconciliation, reconciliation on terms that would do – that would be favorable to our Afghan and NATO allies and to us, is possible right now. But as long as the Taliban believe that we are leaving and that they can ultimately win on the battlefield, what incentive do they have to make peace?

We need to be realistic. Reconciliation with the Taliban will not happen because we want to stop fighting. It will happen when we have broken their will to keep fighting. This is a stubborn fact. And to the extent that the administration tries to substitute carrots for sticks in the negotiations, offering to transfer five high-level Taliban detainees from Guantanamo Bay to Qatar as a confidence-building measure, as media reports suggest, it only signals desperation to give up the fight.

The effect of these and other decisions have been strategically debilitating. It sends a signal to everyone in Afghanistan and the region, both friend and enemy alike, that the United States has lost the will for this fight; that we are hell-bent on leaving Afghanistan regardless of conditions on the ground; that the Taliban is literally coming back, starting with the five detainees possibly headed to Doha; and that the international community will not even help our willing Afghan partners to sustain a sufficient number of forces to lead this fight on their own. None of this may be true. But I can assure you that it is the perception in Afghanistan and the region. And perception is reality.

This set of incentives only emboldens our enemies to keep fighting. It encourages the Pakistani army and ISI to continue hedging their bets by supporting terrorist proxies as a source of strategic depth in Afghanistan. And it leads our Afghan allies to hedge their bets as well by making counterproductive choices about governance and corruption due to their fears about what a post-American future will bring in Afghanistan.

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This perception that America will abandon Afghanistan makes everything our troops are trying to achieve harder. And the upcoming NATO summit is an opportunity to fundamentally change this perception. It is an opportunity to create a new set of incentives

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in this conflict that can strengthen our friends, weaken our enemies and establish the conditions for enduring strategic success.

I want to conclude today by suggesting how we can seize this important opportunity. First, to sustain our fragile progress in Afghanistan, it is critical that the president resist the short-sighted calls for additional troop reductions which would guarantee failure. Our forces are slated to draw down to 68,000 by September, a faster pace than our military commanders recommended, which has significantly increased the risk to our mission. At a minimum, there should be a pause after September to assess the impact of the drawdown. It would be much better to maintain the 68,000 forces through next year's fighting season and possibly longer.

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Similarly, the administration should clarify that while the end strength of the Afghan security forces may eventually be reduced, that decision will be based on conditions on the ground. And if those conditions are not present by 2014, the community of nations, not just the United States and NATO, must help the Afghans to sustain the 352,000-man force as planned. After all, a capable Afghan security force is our exit strategy. It is our guarantee that the gains our troops have made at enormous cost will be sustained after we draw down. We should not do anything to put this core part of our mission at unnecessary risk of failure. And we certainly should not allow budgets to determine strategy in this regard. The previous administration made that mistake for years, and it almost lost us the war.

Beyond these more operational considerations, the upcoming summit is an opportunity to make strategic breakthrough by finalizing a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan. This agreement would serve as a foundation for our long-term political, economic and military relationship beyond 2014. And it could encourage our allies to make similar commitments. With the recent agreements to transfer detention operations and night raids from U.S. to Afghan authorities over time, the path is now clear to conclude a strategic partnership.

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A core element of this agreement would be an enduring U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, including air power, intelligence support, joint operation facilities and special operations forces and trainers, to continue our assistance to the Afghan security forces. This reduced force could ensure that al-Qaida and the Taliban no longer pose a military threat to Afghanistan, our allies and us.

Making these commitments could change the entire incentive structure in this conflict. The strategic partnership would make clear to the Taliban that it cannot wait us out and win on the battlefield. It would demonstrate to Pakistan that continued support for the Taliban will only leave them more isolated and less secure. It could get – give Afghan leaders the reassurance to fight corruption and govern better. And it could set the conditions for our forces to responsibly draw down and hand the lead to the Afghans. In short, the strategic partnership agreement could change the narrative in Afghanistan and the

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region to (sic; from) one of looming international abandonment to enduring international commitment.

Recasting our efforts in this way would also create the conditions for a real process of reconciliation with the Taliban. The critical question here is not whether we are reconciling ourselves to the Taliban, but whether the Taliban is reconciling themselves to the Afghan state and constitution on favorable terms to our Afghan allies and to us. This will only happen when the Taliban no longer thinks they can win on the battlefield. That is not the case now. But it would be the case if we demonstrate to the Taliban that 2014 is not the finish line, that a residual U.S. and NATO force will remain in this fight with our Afghan partners long into the future.

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All of these decisions could create the conditions for a more broad-based political strategy in Afghanistan. President Karzai recently suggested that he's considering moving up the presidential election from 2014 to 2013. This is an interesting idea that we should explore with him and other Afghan political and civil society leaders. This would ensure a greater number of international forces to secure an early election. Furthermore, by decoupling the election from the final year of the security transition, it could increase the odds of both being successful.

Ultimately this decision is for the Afghan government and people to make. What is in our common interest is ensuring that the upcoming election, whenever it happens, is as decisive and inclusive demonstration of democracy in Afghanistan. There are many Afghan citizens who continue to feel unrepresented in the current political system. The upcoming election needs to provide a clear expression of the will of the Afghan people, and with it a strong new mandate for the next Afghan government to tackle the country's major challenges. This does not mean that the problems of governance and corruption will be resolved immediately. But it could create renewed will and public demand to address these challenges more urgently.

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Somewhere over the past few years, the idea that democracy in Afghanistan is an explicit goal of U.S. policy has been lost. It is not talked about as much. This is unfortunate and misguided. The Afghan people remain our natural allies. Like us, they want their governments to fight corruption, to be bound by the rule of law, to be responsive to their interests and to be accountable to their demands. They want to safeguard Afghanistan's sovereignty and independence from meddlesome neighbors. And they want to enter into a long-term strategic partnership with the United States.

The Afghan people do not want the Taliban back. In fact, they are fighting and sacrificing by the thousands to defeat the Taliban. Democracy in Afghanistan is not a goal that we should be backing away from now. To the contrary, helping Afghans to strengthen their democratic system and participate more fully in it can be an essential part of our political strategy to advance our own national security interests with the willing and able Afghan partners.

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Ultimately, all of these decisions return to one fundamental question: Does the United States still have the will to lead and to lead wisely in Afghanistan? For all of our mistakes, for all of our recent setbacks, for all of the committed enemies we face and for all of our neglect of Afghanistan over so many years, nonetheless we are still in control of our destiny in this war. The fight is ours to win or lose.

After all, we have committed to the sacrifice. The years we have devoted, the resources we have sacrificed, the precious lives we have lost, the national security interests and national honor we have at stake, the countless Afghans who are risking everything by siding with us, and after all this, we still have a realistic path to succeed in Afghanistan. And if the president chooses it, my colleagues and I in Congress will strive to secure the same bipartisan support for this war in its twilight hours as when it began more than a decade ago. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

[00:22:25]

MS. MATHEWS: We thought we'd do the questions from here unless you'd prefer to do it from the podium.

SEN. MCCAIN: No, I'd be glad to –

MS. MATHEWS: OK. Great. So the floor is open. I'd like to ask people – because I know there will be many – to identify themselves and to be brief. And we'll take three at a time. Let's start right here and we'll come round.

SEN. MCCAIN: Jessica, do you mind if I stand –

MS. MATHEWS: Sure.

SEN. MCCAIN: – so that I could just scribble notes when I – when –

Q: Shala Siddiqui (ph) from Voice of America, Persian News Network. What effect would the senator say that the changes of the regime or future changes in Syria have got to the situation in Afghanistan regarding Iran? You have been to Syrian border recently, Senator.

[00:23:08]

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, I went to the Syrian border to – as you – as well know, there's 25,000 refugees and refugee camps in Turkey, and during the period of former Secretary-General of U.N. Kofi Annan's pause in discussions, there was another 7,000 that showed up at the refugee camps. Another thousand or so were killed by Bashar Assad. I noted in today's news, not surprisingly, that there is further shelling in Homs. Bashar has already violated the agreement by not withdrawing his tanks and artillery from the cities. It is – it is a tragic, tragic situation. And in the refugee camps, I met with people who had been driven out of their homes, have had their relatives and friends killed, wounded, tortured, raped as a(n) act of – a strategy. The torture and the rapes and the murders are part of the

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modus operandi of the – of the Syrian troops in order to intimidate and to try to cow the Syrian people.

[00:24:29]

I have been around a fair amount of time – in the view of some, too long. I remember in Bosnia when people said we shouldn't go in because we couldn't do anything about it and we didn't have the ability to – same argument with Kosovo. We then regretted – President Clinton later said his greatest regret was that we didn't try to stop the genocide in Rwanda. Libya – we don't know who they are – the usual responses that I've seen many times.

This is a fourth-rate nation, Syria. We should have the ability, with our allies, to establish a sanctuary area so – where they can train, equip, assist these people who are struggling for freedom. And you'll hear the same arguments: We don't know who they are, they're not organized, da-da, da-da, da-da. I heard the same thing about Libya.

And I would also point out – and I'm sorry for the long answer – but General Mattis, our commander in the area, stated before the Armed Services Committee that the fall of Bashar Assad would be the greatest blow to Iran in 25 years. So there is some strategic interest here as well as humanitarian.

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And finally, it's just not a fair fight. It's not a fair fight. The helicopters are now being used, and for us to not provide them with the means to defend themselves is, frankly, I think a stain on our national honor. And I'll make my other answers much shorter. I apologize. (Laughter.)

MS. MATHEWS: But let's take three right here, OK, and just in a row. And let's try to stay on Afghanistan if we can.

Q: My name Kami Butt. I'm with the Pakistani Spectator. Senator, just a couple of weeks before Admiral Mike Mullen took retirement, he said at the same place that we cannot resolve Afghanistan issue without addressing the larger issue of Kashmir. It's really problem is between India and Pakistan, who have made Afghanistan their battleground, and we are wasting our money and dollars. We are spending – we have spent \$600 billion in Afghanistan. We are spending \$2 billion per week there. What are our strategic interest unless we resolve Pakistani problem of Kashmir between Pakistani and India? And Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta – he said the same thing at Woodrow Wilson Center: that without resolving Kashmir issue, there is no way we are going to have peace in that part of the world. What are your thought on that? Thanks.

MS. MATHEWS: OK.

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, my view is that Kashmir obviously has a significant effect in a lot of ways, in addition to those that you described, including the stationing of Pakistani

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troops in very significant numbers on the India Kashmir border rather than on the Afghan border, where, in our view, they could be much more usefully employed.

I will – I visited Kashmir. It's probably one of the most beautiful places on earth, by the way, for those of you that have not seen it. I think it is a long-standing problem. I understand there have been recent, at least, discussions about Kashmir, that the Indians are at least in the mood to have conversations. Lots of people have died there. It's a – it's a sad situation.

[00:28:13]

But to somehow use Kashmir as an excuse for not acting to break ties with the Haqqani network – and by the way, we are – now have strong evidence that these latest spectacular attacks, which are reminiscent of the Tet Offensive – spectacular attacks to get – to affect American public opinion and world public opinion – that doesn't change the fact that – in my view that it is reprehensible that the ISRI – ISI continues to maintain a close relationship with the Haqqani network, who are responsible for the deaths of Americans. And American public opinion is not very – is very unhappy about that as well.

So I understand Kashmir is a huge friction point, but to use that as an excuse for failure of the Pakistani government to act more forcefully in the cause of peace and suppression of terrorist networks that are operating almost openly in parts of Afghanistan is not sufficient reason, in my view.

Yes.

MS. MATHEWS: Here.

Q: My name is Liliana Rodriguez (sp), NDU former student, sir. I just have a question. When the war was declared 10 years ago, were those decision-makers very aware that the war was not going to be conventional but asymmetric?

SEN. MCCAIN: You know, historians will look back on this period of the – both wars with great interest and sometimes concern that the United States of America clearly overextended itself in many ways. And when we got our attention diverted to Iraq, and basically neglected Afghanistan, then that gave opportunities for terrorist networks, for the Taliban to remain viable. It caused us to sort of just not pay the attention that we needed to to the conflict in Afghanistan.

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And there was a period of time, and I was there the night that Bagram – the night the Bagram fell, where if we had done the right thing I think that the – Afghanistan would be a very peaceful nation today. But I also believe that the problem with corruption in the Afghan government and the safe havens in Pakistan have still not been sufficiently addressed to guarantee a peaceful Afghanistan.

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Whether we should have gone into Iraq, I think, is going to be a subject of great debate. And maybe the verdict of history will not be rendered until 10 or 15 years from now when we see how Iraq turns out. But I still maintain steadfastly that Afghanistan was the base for attacks on the United States of America of September 11th. And for us not to do anything about that would have been an abrogation of the responsibilities that we have to the families of those who were killed in the – in the attacks of 2001.

[00:31:40]

MS. MATHEWS: Gary, do you want take –

Q: Senator, I'm Garrett Mitchell and I write The Mitchell Report. And I –

SEN. MCCAIN: I read it.

Q: Oh. Thank you. I – you've been very helpful today, both in being clear and relatively specific about what you think the agenda and the narrative-changing dynamics ought to be. I would like to ask you if you could sort of think out loud a little bit about something that you said in your remarks that I thought was critical, which is that you define what you're outlining for as a – whether the president will decide to exercise the leadership. And it leads me to question how a president, whoever it may be, absent the kind of metrics that we like to have to make other kinds of decisions, reaches the conclusion about what it is that is most in the national interest.

And you also reference the fact that the American people are tiring of this war. I think one of the things that is of increasing concern, and today's stories in the L.A. Times and elsewhere exacerbate that, is whether this – whatever description one wants to give it – but this fatigue with the war is beginning to affect the troops in the field. And so I'm not asking you to change your point of view; I'm asking you how you think a president should think about defining the national interest, including the fact that sometimes, as they say in Texas, you got to know when to hold them and fold them.

SEN. MCCAIN: First of all, as far as the effect on the troops is concerned, the thing that has always astounded me more than anything else is when I visit with these troops, I've met people who have been to Afghanistan and Iraq four, five, six times. I mean, it's amazing what they have done. And yet, they still want to go back. There's a certain unit cohesion that is – that is astounding. The training and equipment that they have has never been better in history, and these young people, being volunteers – and it is an all-volunteer force – are – I do not see that.

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I do see, obviously, PTSD problems. We have suicide issue, although interestingly enough – I probably shouldn't waste your time with this – but we're finding the suicide rate is not related to combat tours in the military, which is something that I simply still don't understand. Brain injuries are a terrific problem. But the morale and esprit of these young men and women is still astonishing to me, and the fact that they all want – not they all, but so many of them want to go back.

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Look, I want to be fair to the president of the United States. I don't think that this issue should be partisan. The president's lead – when's the last time that the president of the United States gave a speech to the American people from the Oval Office and said, my friends, I want to tell you why Afghanistan is important, I want to tell you why the sacrifice of these young men and women is not in vain, and I want to tell you what will happen if we don't succeed in Afghanistan.

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Instead, what I see are the president of the United States – his announcements of withdrawal – announcements of withdrawal. We're going to be out; we're going to be out; we're going to be out. And so Americans follow the leadership of the president of the United States. And I feel the same way about Syria. I mean, when this kind of slaughter and torture and rape is going on in a country, yet the president of the United States has declared prevention of massacres is a vital national security interest -- he has said Assad must go. That's his words, not mine. And yet, any objective observer will tell you, with the inflow of – with Russian arms and Iranian arms and Iranians on the ground, that the battlefield does not indicate that anytime soon Bashar Assad is going to go.

In fact, the Kofi Annan plan doesn't even call for him to go. So my answer to you is, I would like to see the president of the United States talk to the American people – he has very high favorable ratings with the American people – and tell them why it's important that we have a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan, tell them why these young men and women were still in harm's way from a Haqqani network which is cooperating with the ISI. I think the American people are very smart and they can make their own judgment, but they need to be led and they need to be informed.

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And finally, I understand that the elections – 2010 and prior to this one – jobs and the economy, jobs and the economy, jobs and the economy – I understand that. But I also say that our national security interests are tied up in that part of the world in a very, very substantial way, including the Iranian issue.

MS. MATHEWS: Let's take some on this side of the – go ahead. We'll take a couple here.

Q: Hi, Senator McCain. First I want to thank you for your remarks. My name's Debbie Smith. I'm the executive director of PATHS. We're building a school for kids with disabilities in Afghanistan, in Kabul. Given that security is a prerequisite for development, and in an effort to create greater interaction between the Afghan government and the Afghan people, it seems that the development efforts there have taken more of a top-down approach. And I'm wondering if more of a local – more of localized projects, smaller projects, sort of bottom-up approach might be better. I wonder if you could speak to that.

SEN. MCCAIN: You know, we learned in Iraq, much to our dismay and the wasting of I don't know how many billions of tax dollars, that without a secure environment,

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these projects are doomed to failure nine times out of 10. You know, I remember being in Iraq – I think it was 2006 – and I met with the general who was in charge of a bunch of these projects. And I said, how do you monitor them? And he said, oh, we use drones. I'm not making that up. We use drones. I said, really?

So there's got to be – there's got to be a secure environment. That's why this Ring Road was such an important step forward; it for once tied all of Afghanistan together, as you know. And projects like that are of inestimable value, but you've got to have a secure environment. And that means – if you're talking about from the grassroots up, that means a partnership between the ANA and our troops. And I saw that in Kandahar. I saw it in many other places.

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And so that has got to be – when we adapted the surge strategy in Iraq, it wasn't just the increase in troops. It was a dramatic change in how we do business. Iraqi soldiers and American soldiers slept side by side. They lived together, they worked together, they patrolled together. They became closest friends. And that's the kind of environment in that you get the – get the secure environment so that these projects can move forward. And I agree with you that top-down does not work.

MS. MATHEWS: Go ahead.

Q: Senator McCain, my name is Jake Diliberto. I was a Marine in Afghan and Iraq. I thank you for your service.

SEN. MCCAIN: Did you – did you disagree with what I said about the morale of the troops?

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Q: Slightly, sir.

SEN. MCCAIN: OK, go ahead.

Q: I think after 10 years of war the discipline of an all-volunteer force is severely challenged. And especially doing – (inaudible) – conflict, as counterinsurgency war is, it's going to break down the morale. But that's not really direct to my question.

I wanted – sir, I'm curious about our interest and the host government interests. To be honest, we don't really know why the Iraq surge totally worked. We know some variables. But that was the fifth --

SEN. MCCAIN: I know. I know. General – I'll get you an appointment with General Petraeus and he'll be glad to explain it to you. Go ahead.

Q: Sir, my Ph.D. dissertation is on this. Dave Kilcullen –

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SEN. MCCAIN: Then you should know. (Scattered laughter.)

Q: Yeah, well, Dave Kilcullen seems to think that it – that was our fifth attempt. And the – in the fifth attempt of our trying to –

SEN. MCCAIN: It was the first serious attempt at a counterinsurgency that would succeed. I don't care if it was the 50th. Go ahead.

[00:40:26]

Q: Fair enough, sir.

SEN. MCCAIN: Yeah.

Q: But there was a lot of variables that we got lucky on with the surge, quite a bit: the Sunnis breaking with al-Qaida –

SEN. MCCAIN: Napoleon said generals make their own luck. Go ahead.

Q: Fair enough. (Laughter.) But Iraq and Afghanistan, let's – being frank, are just totally different. And the question is how do we know that the Afghan interests line up with our interests? I've been to Afghanistan many times, since I served as a Marine. And it does not appear to me that Afghan interests, Pakistan interests line up with ours. What makes you convinced that their interests and ours are the same, that stability and an Afghan central government is something that they want for sure? I mean, just because they don't want the Taliban doesn't mean that they want Kabul either.

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, thank you. And thank you for your service to the country. It's – I'm proud to be in your presence.

Q: Sir, by the way, I will take that appointment with General Petraeus. I'll speak with you after this. (Laughter, applause.)

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, I'll call him – I'll call him – I'll call him for an appointment when (it's over ?) – (laughter) – right away. Your first point is valid. They don't want the Taliban back. There have been numerous surveys done of the Afghan people. They absolutely do not want the Taliban back. And obviously, we don't want to subject the people of Afghanistan to that kind of regime to start with.

[00:41:50]

Second of all, I believe that they are motivated by the same principles that motivate our immortal words about all: All are created by God with certain inalienable rights. They believe that. They have different traditions; they have different customs; they have a different religion. But the fundamental desire that they have, in my view, is universal. And so I don't think that the Afghan people want to live in a country that's rife with corruption, as certainly is in the case of some parts of Afghanistan. I don't think they want to live in a –

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in a country where the – as we know, the suicide bombers are indiscriminate in the kind of killing that they – that they carry out.

I think they want a chance to have a life of peace and prosperity and – that all human beings do. And our goal, it seems to me, is to do what we can to provide that. What is the best way to do that? In my view, as we are – I tried to mention in my remarks, as we go into 2014 – have a trained and equipped Afghan National Army which can take over these responsibilities. We can give them technical assistance; we can provide drones; we can in – supply a lot of things to them. But the brunt of the load is carried by the Afghan National Army themselves. And many of those are people who live in their own hometowns and their villages and places.

[00:43:19]

So I – the question is, as I tried to point out in my remarks, can we achieve this transition to a long-term strategic partnership with Afghanistan, which would then give comfort to them and some sense of security, but at the same time turn over the responsibilities to the Afghan government and people? And I do not take that challenge lightly. And I still – I hate to keep mentioning it, but we've got to have some progress on this issue of corruption in the Afghan government because sooner or later it filters right back down to the police, which then, as you know – as you well know – at the beginning, the people were more afraid of the police than anybody else, as you know. And they've made dramatic improvement. But it's easy to slide back.

And again, thanks for serving.

MS. MATHEWS: All right, let's take some – a bunch in the back, if we could.

Q: Thank you. This is Lalit Jha from Press Trust of India. I would like to draw your attention to what General Kayani said in Pakistan today. He said he would like to see the country spend less on the defense. And he also says that he's in favor of peaceful coexistence with India, which he says is vital for both the countries. Do you see any change – but through this statement, do you see any change in the – (inaudible) – Pakistan army?

SEN. MCCAIN: I didn't get the question.

MS. MATHEWS: I think the question had to do with a statement that General Kayani made about the orientation of the Pakistani army.

Q: I can repeat it if you want.

[00:44:53]

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, I think that – I appreciate General Kayani's statements, but I think facts on the ground are very clear that the majority of the best-trained – best equipment of their army is on the border with Kashmir rather than in the border with Afghanistan. I have great sympathy for the Pakistani military leadership in that there is a government which is in many ways dysfunctional in Pakistan, and they are struggling. But at

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the same time, it's just a source of never-ending frustration to all of us to see this continued relationship between the ISI and the Haqqani network when General Kayani is responsible for the appointment of the head of the ISI.

MS. MATHEWS: Yes, can you continue back there, please?

Q: Ayub Khawreen, and I'm an Afghan journalist, work for Afghan TV Ashna. We live-broadcast to Afghanistan. And it's a couple things before I move on to my question on Pakistan. It's – unfortunately, it is, again more of – more and more of ISI.

MS. MATHEWS: Can you stand up, please, because –

Q: Yes. I'm sorry.

MS. MATHEWS: Thank you. And please try to be brief.

[00:46:21]

Q: Sure. You just mentioned that you feel your sympathy for the Pakistani army. And in your earlier comments it was very clear that the Pakistani ISI is supporting their – its proxies like the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, or who did the Bombay – Lashkar-e-Taiba, who did the Bombay bombings, and Haqqani network, who is responsible for the beheadings of many Afghans and Americans in Afghanistan.

What worries me and what gets me into this sort of conspiracy theory that's very much common in Afghanistan, that the inaction of the U.S. on the part of – against Pakistan or anything on Pakistan makes people – mostly Afghans, talking for Afghan population that I am in touch with – is that the ISI or the CIA has something in common. It is – bin Laden is killed in Abbottabad. Haqqani is stationed in Waziristan. The – Hafiz Saeed is making public rallies in Islamabad and Karachi and mocking over the bounty – of the U.S. announcement for the bounty.

What is – what is stopping, from a policy perspective, on the U.S. – regardless of the partisan politics here in Washington, what does – stops the U.S. to – or does it have any leverages to pressure Pakistan in that region? Or what is the strategic partnership between Washington and Islamabad that would stop you to force the Pakistani military, who is in – who is seen as the actual driver in Pakistani politics, to commit to the U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region?

MS. MATHEWS: Thank you.

[00:48:22]

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, first of all, one of the problems that's very serious – and I probably didn't emphasize it enough – is the view on the part of many in the Pakistani military and the Pakistani government that the United States is leaving. And that is also true amongst the Taliban and others. You know, there's the famous anecdote about the Taliban prisoner who said to the American interrogator, you've got the watches; we've got the time.

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And so in some ways, in a sort of strange way, you can understand the relationship between ISI and the Haqqani network, which goes all the way back to the days of removing Russia from – helping Russia being forced to leave Afghanistan.

A guy that used to be a high-ranking member of the Bush administration was at a meeting not too long ago with Zardari and said, what do you think about the chances for peace talks with the Taliban? And he just laughed and said, why should they; they know you're leaving. That's why, in my view – and why I tried to emphasize the strategic partnership is such an important element of showing all elements that are involved in that part of the – of the world that we are intent on staying and maintaining a relationship which would help the Afghan country to have a secure future.

[00:49:55]

So I deplore this relationship between the Haqqani network and ISI. There have been so many stories about – that show that relationship, including the latest incidents. I understand a person was captured who is a well-known Haqqani individual. But at the same time, if they believe that the United States is leaving and they can't leave, they have to accommodate to the neighborhood. And that's why a lot of them are hedging their bets.

And that's another reason why I go back again. The strategic partnership is not the end-all – beginning and end, but I think it's a vital element in changing what is now the equation and the belief in the region that the United States is departing. And by the way, in case you missed it, the Australians announced yesterday that they're leaving a year early. The French have announced their departure. The exit sign is blinking, and that's why it's important for us to get this thing done as quickly as possible. And the meeting in Chicago is a perfect place to have that all in place.

Yes, sir.

MS. MATHEWS: All right – oh, go ahead.

Q: Hi, Nico Hines, London Times. You mentioned the use of helicopters in Syria. Would you support of the imposition of a no-fly zone? And what other specific measures you would support being imposed in Syria?

[00:51:27]

SEN. MCCAIN: Thank you. I've visited with a lot of people in the region and from different countries. They want American leadership. They don't want American unilateral action. We don't want American boots on the ground. But we do – they do want American leadership to work with them to the establishment of sanctuaries, to provision of weapons. And there's already a little bit of that going on, but not enough.

Price for a bullet on the black market today for a Kalashnikov? Four dollars. So there is some movement, but it cries out for American leadership. And what I hope we could do is if – and I'm confident this slaughter will continue – is establish a sanctuary to

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allow them to work more closely together – the Syrian National Council and the Free Syria Army – who – all of whom I have met with.

[00:52:26]

And there is – by the way, there is a danger of extremists coming into this conflict. And that danger increases every day that this conflict drags out. More and more extremists will come into the – into the fight. And so there's a large number of options that we have. We showed in Libya, even though it was different and they had Benghazi already as their sanctuary – but remember, Gadhafi was at the gates of Benghazi when we finally intervened. So each one of these is different, but the fundamentals are the same. Are we going to assist people who are struggling for the basic human rights that we believe apply to all people?

MS. MATHEWS: We have time for just one more.

SEN. MCCAIN: Could we do two?

MS. MATHEWS: Two more, great. (Laughter.) We – I'd be glad to do 20. (Laughter.)

SEN. MCCAIN: Or three.

MS. MATHEWS: Would you like to pick them, the lucky last two?

SEN. MCCAIN: Yes, ma'am.

Q: Senator, you –

MS. MATHEWS: Oh, wait, now, you already had one, so –

SEN. MCCAIN: Oh, you've already had one? Sorry – I'm sorry.

MS. MATHEWS: So let –

SEN. MCCAIN: Let me go there. (Laughter.) I'm sorry.

[00:53:34]

MS. MATHEWS: Is that your second question as well?

Q: No, it's my first.

MS. MATHEWS: Oh, sorry. Go ahead.

Q: Senator McCain, do you have any comments on the story that was – the pictures that were published in the Los Angeles Times today with – depicting U.S. soldiers from 2010?

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SEN. MCCAIN: My only comment that I have – this is this latest thing down in Colombia and the American soldier – or military man that went – left his post and killed Afghans – is that it's deplorable and despicable. And I'm sure justice will be rendered. But what bothers me more than anything else is that 99.9 percent of these young Americans who are serving over there have the highest standards. I've seen with my own eyes the thousands acts of kindness and generosity that our men and women in the military show to the Afghan people. I've seen the partnerships and the – and the relationships that are developed, the friendships.

[00:54:38]

And all of that, of course, is tarnished so badly by a story such as what you're talking about. I'm sure that they will find who did it, and they will be punished according to the Uniform Code of Military Justice. But it does such damage. It does such damage, and it grieves me because there's so many brave and honorable young Americans who have served there and so many who have sacrificed, so many that I see out at Bethesda who – that are – have suffered the wounds of war, and it tarnishes their reputation. That's what makes me sad.

Yes, sir.

Q: Thank you very much. You just – this is Mohamed Wafa from the Middle East Broadcast Network. You just answered the question of no-fly zone, but the issue of arming the opposition had come sporadically during this presentation. You had called before for arming the opposition, and you mentioned – just mentioned that there is a need to train and equip the opposition. Now, some people here and in the Middle East think that arming the opposition is still valid because there is violence even after the truce. But the leaders who matter, they don't press for arming the opposition. And I really want to know what exactly the arms or the equipment or the training you are calling for, and how to convince the leaders over the world that might do it – how do you convince them that this is necessary? Thank you.

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, first of all, I think it's important to remind you again that Russian arms are flowing in in very large numbers, that the Iranians are there also with their equipment and training and people on the ground. So it's not a fair fight. It's not a fair fight. So for us to say, well, we really shouldn't be helping out these people who are literally fighting with their bare hands in some cases is really something that I can't accept.

[00:56:41]

First thing, you need probably is some anti-tank weapons. And they're – and they're fairly simple weapons. We – he's rolling his tanks into the urban areas. You may need a – and he's now using helicopters – you may need – certainly RPGs. I – but – you know, and I can't really go down an inventory, except that I can tell you that a bullet for a Kalashnikov is \$4 on the black market. They're not getting many arms.

Now, I am told through indirect sources that some arms are filtering in from some other countries, and we don't even have to do that directly. In Libya, a lot of arms flowed in

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to the TNC, and they didn't – weren't delivered by the United States of America. It was by other countries, and some of them are very wealthy countries.

So I would leave that up to the assessment of our military people – but almost anything they need in order to resist. And also, we could – they could use a lot of our intelligence capability as well to track the movements, particularly of their military convoys and tanks from one place to another. There's a lot of – there's a lot of things that we could do.

[00:57:56]

And again I want to point out that every time we're – one of these things comes up, we don't know who they are. I remember in Tunisia, even – ah, it'll be al-Qaida. In Libya – it's going to be al-Qaida. Usually, I saw that on FOX, by the way. (Laughter.) But anyway –

So I know that these people – a lot of them, by the way, don't require as much training as you might think because a lot of them – several thousand of them are defectors from the – from the Syrian army. But to somehow believe that Bashar Assad has any legitimacy in the world defies imagination.

Last one. Yes, sir.

Q: Hi, yes. My name is Matt Sherman, former State Department official who served six years in Iraq and Afghanistan on the ground.

You talk about the reduction of Afghan security forces in post-2015 and the effect that might have with those soldiers being unemployed. If that – the funding for the ANSF is also complemented with economic and market type of programs to offset that, would that be a position that you would support if it's recommended by military and civilian officers and commanders on the ground?

SEN. MCCAIN: Absolutely. Hand the mic to the guy in front of you – we – because I'll answer him too; he was disappointed that when I pointed at him, that you jumped up. (Laughter.)

Q: I will – (inaudible) –

SEN. MCCAIN: But could I – could I just say – could I answer that very quickly?

[0059:31]

Q: Sure.

SEN. MCCAIN: I think you know very well, as I do, that 95 percent – please don't hold me to exact that, but around 95 percent of the money, of the funding that goes into Afghanistan today comes from the United States of America and our allies. So we leave and that money dries up, they're going to – they're going to be in a depression. So obviously, I

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believe that it's going to be vitally necessary that we continue various assistance programs with the Afghans.

But it also goes back to the first questioner; we've got to have a secure environment. I believe a strong ANA can provide that. But I – we're – they're going to need a lot of assistance for a long period of time. And I know that makes my taxpayers in Arizona a little angry. But I also try to point out to them the alternative that would – the results of the alternative, which is failure.

Yes, sir. Go ahead.

[01:00:30]

Q: (Inaudible) – Daily, sir. When you say sanctuary for Syria, you mean inside Syria, I believe?

SEN. MCCAIN: I mean – I mean, I think we need to find the most effective sanctuary that we can. I think that – look, I'm not a war planner. I leave that up to the professionals in the Pentagon. But I do know the principles of warfare. And one of the principles of warfare is you've got to have a place to operate from. And so whether that's inside Syria or inside of another country is something that I'm not committed to. Off the top of my head, I'd like to see it inside Syria, and I am told that that is being – that option is being discussed as well.

And so – go ahead.

Q: And what role should Turkey play in that regard, sir?

SEN. MCCAIN: What –

MS. MATHEWS: Turkey. What role should Turkey play?

SEN. MCCAIN: Well, the Turks have said – Turkish leadership, and it's very interesting to watch the evolution of the prime minister, Erdogan, that he's gone from a close friendship with Bashar Assad now to talking about – and these are all conversations; no one has committed – the – again, this is where American leadership comes in – that they're talking about different ideas and plans that could be employed. I know that one of – and I say one -- of the options that is being considered is sanctuaries within Syria. There are other ideas being out there. I'd just like to see us start by giving them some weapons with which they could defend themselves. But I can't say that I would be committed to that, but it seems to me that that should be an option that should be seriously considered.

[01:02:15]

Could I say I thank you for being here. I thank everybody I know who had something else to do this afternoon. And I appreciate your involvement in these issues. And believe me, when I go to the refugee camp, they really, really, really want American leadership. They look to us. We are their moral model. I know America is not popular in

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some parts of the Middle East. And whether that's deserved or not is the subject of another engagement –

MS. MATHEWS: (Inaudible.)

SEN. MCCAIN: – that we have. But right now they are crying out for our assistance. And right now I believe we are at a critical point in Afghanistan. And what happens between now and May in Chicago I think can determine the future course of the events that may take place in Afghanistan and Pakistan. And overall I am guardedly confident we can achieve it. And I think that then Americans could look back with some pride at the sacrifice that we made with so much American blood and treasure.

[01:03:20]

Thank you very much. (Applause.) Thanks for having me.

MS. MATHEWS: Thank you.

SEN. MCCAIN: Thank you.

MR. : Senator McCain, would you mind signing – (inaudible)?

SEN. MCCAIN: I'll be glad to.

(END)