



# AFGHANISTAN: SEARCHING FOR POLITICAL AGREEMENT

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**WELCOME/MODERATOR:**

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**SPEAKER:**

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JESSICA MATHEWS: Welcome, everybody. I'm Jessica Mathews, president of the Carnegie Endowment. It's a great pleasure to be here. Gilles and I spent 14 hours together in a car driving from Paris to Lisbon stranded in Europe a few weeks ago, so we've got a chance to really spend some time talking, and I learned so much so that I'm eager to share some of that with you.

I think most of you know – probably all of you – that Gilles is a longstanding expert on Afghanistan, stretching back to the years of the Soviet occupation. For the last eight years he's been one of the keenest observers of the war there; I would say consistently prescient about the direction of events on the ground and consistently six months or more ahead of where coalition policy eventually gets to. And this has made him not always a welcome voice in Washington but it has established him as a vital one to listen to if the United States and its partners are going to achieve a measure of success there.

So I thought I would begin by first asking Gilles to say a word about the current conditions on the ground. I think one of the hardest things for those of us who spend a lot of time thinking about this is the distance from here to there. You've been in Afghanistan for about two months a year for the last many years. Tell us about this trip first. Where were you, what did you see, what changes, what does it look like on the ground today?

[0:02:16.7]

GILLES DORRONSORO: Well, I was one month in Afghanistan so I saw a lot of people but in few places, actually. Three places, mostly: Kabul and around Kabul, Kandahar and Gardez, which is probably around here. (Chuckles.) And what was striking compared to last year – to August of last year – is that we have less and less opportunity to move outside the cities. It's becoming extremely dangerous. For example, in the East, the U.N. is moving mostly by helicopters – coalition helicopters most of the time; not always.

And Kandahar, you know, the security is what you think it is, so it's very bad even inside the city. Having said that, Kandahar is not especially dangerous for individuals. If you do not have bodyguards, if you are in a normal car, you're not a target for the Taliban. But the insecurity is such that not very far from the house where I was – and it was right across to the center of Kandahar – the police station was attacked just two weeks before I came. And here we are not very far from Ahmad Wali Karzai's house. You know, we are quite in the center of Kandahar.

Kabul: In Kabul the security is good except a few suicide attacks here and there, and so you can walk in the street; you can do whatever you want.

But the second thing probably is that everybody is extremely pessimistic. There is now a consensus from the people working on Afghanistan as opposed maybe to people working on more general problems about security that the counterinsurgency is failing in Afghanistan. As you know, Marja is really not working well – not working at all, in fact – and everybody is extremely pessimistic about what's going to happen in Kandahar right now. Maybe we will come back to this question later.

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MS. MATHEWS: Okay, so in the new report, which everybody I think has a copy of, you conclude that the most promising remaining route to success – maybe promising is not exactly the right word –

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MR. DORRONSORO: Or success. (Chuckles.)

MS. MATHEWS: – or maybe success isn't, but involves seeking a political agreement with the Taliban. So take us through your thinking on that, how you reached that conclusion.

MR. DORRONSORO: Yeah, thanks. First, probably you remember that my first report when I arrived at the Carnegie two years ago almost was – the idea was built around the idea that it was not time to negotiate with the Taliban, so I changed my mind. I thought that at that time that negotiating with the Taliban was a bad idea because it was, in a way, accepting the balance of power, accepting that Karzai was weak and was going to stay weak.

And I changed my mind last summer, actually, after the election – the presidential election in Afghanistan – that was, as you know, a total disaster. And from there I spent a few months thinking and not writing. I was supposed to write a report I never wrote. And I analyzed the situation, I spoke a lot with people who were experts on Afghanistan and the idea was that it was not possible to do something with the Karzai regime anymore.

So the idea that we are going to wait two years, three years to build the Karzai regime, the “Afghanization” process, for example, is not going to work. It's not quite clear that the Karzai regime is going to be stronger next year. Actually, all I have seen during this trip shows me that, on the contrary, it's likely that Karzai is going to be weaker and the coalition is going to be weaker next year. And so the question of negotiation because if the situation is going to be worse, I don't see exactly why we should wait for the negotiation. Wait for what, it's not very clear. Hence the report.

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MS. MATHEWS: So then you don't see – you said that not only will the government not be stronger next year but the coalition, which would suggest that 30,000 additional troops is not a plus. Is that – ?

MR. DORRONSORO: Well, that's two questions, actually. First, as you know, the Americans are not the only troops fighting in Afghanistan. And if we look at what's happening in the North and the West – the Germans especially – we see that the German troops are not able to learn. The learning curve is flat basically. They don't learn from their mistakes for different reasons. First, they are not allowed to have casualties in practice. They cannot do things that are potentially dangerous. They cannot test; they cannot do real counterinsurgency. The second thing is that it's an army that has never done counterinsurgency, really, and it takes a lot of time to understand what's going on.

So, I would say that, first, if you take all the non-American troops, you will see that it's a failure, or it's a situation that is not exactly a failure but that is not going to be a success. I'm thinking about the French – the east of Kabul. It's not a failure, it's not a total disaster, there are some positive aspects. But it's not going to be a success. The Taliban are going to stay.

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And now if you come to the American troops you see, I think, two elements. First, you remember that the counterinsurgency strategy as developed by McChrystal was supposed to be the new strategy of NATO and the American troops, and it's not going to happen on the ground.

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The only place where counterinsurgency as defined by McChrystal was tried is Marja, this little place in Helmand. Ah, should be someplace here. And it did not work. It means with 15,000 troops for the offensive in Marja a few months ago now, the result is that the coalition was not able to clear the ground from the Taliban militants. The Taliban are still here.

The American troops control the roads, the bazaar and not much else actually. And the population is not working with the coalition. Plus the idea that you can bring the administration – the local administration – from outside, the idea of a government-in-a-box is not working. So that's the first thing.

So what is exactly the strategy if we are not going to replicate the Marja operation? So it means that there is no official strategy of NATO. I don't understand what is the strategy. What's going to happen now in Kandahar? Kandahar is supposed to be the big thing – the next big thing. Kandahar, you have a city that is probably between 700,000 and 1 million inhabitants. It's not very sure. And the reinforcement is going to be less than 5,000. Well, I would say it's 5,000 max.

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And with that, it's out of the question that we can break the Taliban insurgency in Kandahar – the city or the province. It's totally out of the question. At the same time, it's clear now that we are not going to reform the local administration. The local administration is totally corrupt, as you know. There is one – just one – professional judge for the whole city. And most of the people when they have disagreements, they are going outside the city and they see a Taliban judge because they tend to trust the Taliban judge – the society judge – and they settle their disagreement like that.

And it's official now we are not going to change that because we don't know how to change that. How do you want to reform the police when all the ministers of interior is totally corrupt? How do you do that? There is no official answer. So we are going to fight. Probably the Taliban are going to lose ground in a few places, and in one year, the situation is going to be exactly the same, basically.

So for all these reasons – plus there are more specific situations, especially in the East here and in the North that are very bad – for all these reasons I think it's impossible with the surge to change the balance of power in Afghanistan. The Taliban are winning and they are much stronger this year than last year, and I think it's going to be worse next year.

MS. MATHEWS: So given all that, what evidence is there, if any, that the Taliban are interested in talking?

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MR. DORRONSORO: I am not sure about that. So you will see, the report is built on – I mean, there are two different parts in the report. There is the first part, when I am describing the failure of the grand strategy, and I think I'm reflecting a consensus of people I tend to trust, actually. The second part is about doing something and, here, I'm not sure it's going to work. I just say it's the only way we have, or at least it's the best way we have.

So no, I'm not sure that they want to negotiate. What I know, what I am sure of, is that it's better to start negotiation now than next year because next year the Taliban, we have less reason to negotiate than this year.

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Having said that, we are not going to negotiate, at least at the beginning, directly with the Taliban. We are going through the Pakistani army because, as you know, Pakistan has this strategy since 2001 and before 2001 of course of supporting the Taliban. Then if you want today to speak to the Taliban leadership, you have to go through the Pakistani army and through the ISI.

So here, I guess for different reasons, Pakistan is interested in some kind of negotiation between the Taliban, the current regime in Kabul and the United States. So that would be one very important element: putting the Taliban in the mood for negotiation.

MS. MATHEWS: Let's say that talks got started, and let's even imagine some kind of agreement. How can one imagine this group that President Obama called "ruthless radicals" and "repressive" – how can one imagine a stable political equilibrium with them? Or would some agreement be a temporary stage between now and a Taliban government?

[0:14:06.5]

MR. DORRONSORO: It's a fair question. Actually, we don't know exactly. Nobody can predict that. We can try, and we can try in the best possible conditions. What we know now is that local negotiation with the Taliban, the idea that you can cherry-pick the Taliban is just a dream, you know. It's not going to work. And in a way if it's working, it could be worse because it could be the start of a crazy civil war in some places.

But what we know is that the Taliban are a political movement. It's a political movement. There is a rationality in the Taliban. I mean, they are not more crazy than other groups in Afghanistan, if that's a kind of standard. So I don't see why the Taliban would refuse to have some kind of negotiation and some kind of power-sharing in Kabul.

What we have to think about now is how do we get some guarantees of the stability of the process? And here, I think there are two or three elements that are important. First, the coalition should withdraw slowly without a clear and fixed timeframe, you know. So if you have to stay a little longer, you have to stay a little longer.

What we should avoid is the kind of situation we have in Iraq right now where the Americans are going to leave whatever, and the situation isn't stable. So if the Americans were able maybe to stay a little longer, it would have a kind of stabilizing effect.

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That's the first thing. The second thing is probably the coalition should try to keep some bases in Afghanistan. I don't think about huge bases. I don't think about 50,000 or 100,000 men. I'm thinking of small bases for two elements. First, in itself it could be part of the stabilization. Second, it would be used to strike against radical groups trying to come back in Afghanistan – al-Qaida but also I'm thinking of Lashkar-e-Taiba because India has a major stake in Afghanistan because of that now of course.

And the last element is that we should not stop trying to do something with the Afghan National Army. I'm speaking about negotiation, but negotiation, even with a ceasefire, doesn't mean that we are going to stop trying to reinforce the Afghan National Army. And at some point, it's reasonable to think that the Afghan National Army could grow to probably 150(000), even 200,000 men. It's not totally out of question. And also that could have a stabilizing effect.

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So, no, there is no guarantee but I think that that's the best we have right now.

MS. MATHEWS: Perhaps I ought to – I have a long list of other questions, but open this to everyone else. And if you would just introduce yourself, we'll go around the room. I saw Barbara first and we'll come – (inaudible, off mike).

Q: Hi, I'm Barbara Slavin. I'm trying to understand your – (off mike).

MS. MATHEWS: Oh, sorry, excuse me. We are filming it, so we should use the mike.

[0:17:26.0]

Q: Okay, thanks. Hi, Barbara Slavin, nice to see you again. I'm trying to understand what this negotiation would be about. We've already had some feelers from Hamid Karzai, through the Saudis and others, where he has tried to talk to some of the Taliban leaders. He has already had discussions with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, I believe.

What is the negotiation about? What are you offering the Taliban that would make them be willing to put their weapons down and join a parliament, especially when Karzai is considered to be so corrupt and feckless? Thanks.

MR. DORRONSORO: Actually, there are two questions in your questions. The first question is, who is going to negotiate, actually? And implicitly you think that it's going to be Karzai with maybe the Saudis. And I think probably it's not the best way to negotiate.

Why? Because, first, the Saudis are going to be a problem for the Iranians, so the Iranians will be much more aggressive in the game. Right now, they are kind of neutral, they are hedging, they are training some Taliban; at the same time supporting Karzai, not forgetting the Shia and trying to make business with everybody.

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So, I mean, it's complex to say the least. If the Saudis are back – really back – in the negotiation, they have a central role, the Iranians are not going to be happy about that. The same thing for India. So we should try to keep it simple, I would say.

Right now, the spoiler is Pakistan. Without Pakistan, the Taliban would not be where they are right now. So Pakistan must be in the negotiation, Karzai also, but the Americans – the coalition and especially the Americans must be the central player in the negotiations.

The idea that you can send Karzai to negotiate with the Taliban is not a good idea because, first, Karzai and the Taliban have the same basis of power. So, if there is a deal, Karzai is going to lose everything because actually with this guy, they know what they are working for. It's for money, mostly. So the Karzai family in Kandahar knows most probably that they are not going to stay very long in Afghanistan, considering this level of violence and the level of distrust of the local population.

So if you put the negotiation in the hand of Karzai, the risk is that Karzai is going to start the negotiation but he's not going to end the negotiation. And we are very interested in ending the negotiation, you know? So that would be my first point.

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So we have to take definite charge and, here, Pakistan can help. Pakistan has no interest in humiliating the United States and the coalition in Afghanistan. They have won on the ground. Basically, they have made their point. It's not possible to make a deal in Afghanistan without Pakistan. It's okay. We have understood that.

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So, that was the first part of the question. The second part is what to negotiate? There are plenty of things we can negotiate. First, I would suggest to negotiate a ceasefire because ceasefire is very good. It's difficult. It's like when you're running, you know; if you stop running, it's hard to go back, yeah? And war is like that. So let's have a ceasefire so people can make local deals. Afghans are very good at that.

There's going to be local deals everywhere. In some places it's not going to work so we will have local fights, but we can live with that. And mostly, people are going to change their perception. The Taliban is going to change their perception; the population is going to change its perception, so it's good, basically. It gives us some kind of a margin of maneuver – no civilian casualties, no night raids and all those things.

The second point – and in itself it's part of the negotiation; it has a political impact. The second thing is that the withdrawal – partial, total, with a timetable or not – of the coalition is on the table and the Taliban wants that, okay? It's a symbolic issue. It's very important.

Third, there is the new constitution – new constitution, or the current constitution but with some amendments, whatever, but there is a new political system to negotiate. What about the ethnic minorities? What about human rights? What about how do you elect people – which level? How do you organize the system? That's a key. That's very important because the last point about international guarantees is not valid without this internal, relatively stable political system.

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And then the last point is for us the key: be sure that bin Laden is not back in Afghanistan the day after we leave. Hence, the question of to keep a few bases for the coalition – to have a level of cooperation to have an agreement with the Afghan government that we can strike directly if there are some bases in Nuristan or Kunar, for example, or in Khost if we see Lashkar-e-Taiba. We can do that with drones, actually. It's not that complicated. So I think that's the basis of the negotiation.

MS. MATHEWS: Yes?

Q: Ravi Khanna, VOA TV. You're talking about negotiations. Is it for power-sharing, number one. Number two, if you see the players, USA does not want negotiations with the top leaders but only with the locals, India is totally against any kind of negotiations with the Taliban, Pakistan wants its own agenda with the Taliban, Iran is against any kind of negotiations. How do you reconcile all this to start negotiations with the Taliban?

MR. DORRONSORO: On the first point, of course it's about power-sharing because, I mean, the Taliban are part of the Afghan fabric. They are here to stay. If you want to end the civil war in Afghanistan, the Taliban should have a place somewhere.

I don't think it's very, very – I mean, it's not very nice. These people are radical. They are fundamentalists. A lot of social groups are going to pay the price for that. But let's face it; the coalition wasn't able to have any kind

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of strategy for seven or eight years, and the strategy chosen last year was not exactly the right one. So I mean, we have a price to pay for our inability to have any interest in this war.

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On the second point, that's why – sure, the India is against a negotiation. I would be more nuanced for Iran. I'm not sure Iran is against any kind of negotiation. It's more what is in the negotiation with the Iranis – I mean Iranians; sorry. For Pakistan, yes, but that is going to be part of the deal.

Pakistan is a potential spoiler. We cannot do without Pakistan. We have to face it, okay? So let's see what they want. The Pakistani army is going to face a major problem. They supported the Taliban. The Taliban basically won the war, except that now how do you keep control of the Taliban when they will be back in Afghanistan? And that's a major problem. And the Pakistanis, they don't have a lot of ideas about that, and they know that they have arrested the number two – the Taliban number two, Baradar – because he was trying to negotiate directly with the coalition – sorry, with the Afghan government.

And in itself it shows that between the Taliban and the Pakistani army it's not always true love, you know? So here we have the possibility also to nationalize, to organize the Taliban, to bring them back in Afghanistan. And so it would give us a margin of maneuver – a greater ability to deal with them because it will be out of the control of the ISI.

[0:26:07.2]

MS. MATHEWS: I'll come back there next.

Q: Thanks. Gilles, Garry Mitchell from the Mitchell Report. I want to be sure that I have understood the premises that you laid out, and then I want to pose a – tag a question on the end of it.

The premises, as I understand it, are that – call it what you want – the McChrystal strategy, the surge, the whatever, is not going to work; second, that the Karzai government isn't going to get better, cleaner, and/or improving its relationships with locals. And, third, the Taliban are here to stay.

A, are those three characterizations a correct replay of what you have said or written? And B, is it for those reasons, particularly the first and the second, that you are recommending the beginning of negotiations, or are you recommending the beginning of – if you could know today that you were wrong about A and B, or that you might be, would you still be recommending the beginning of negotiations?

In other words, is this sort of saying, look, we're going to lose this thing anyway, so let's get started now? Or are you saying, I think that in the long term, this is the smartest thing for us to do under any circumstances?

[0:28:02.9]

MR. DORRONSORO: Okay, so I think you – I agree with your three characterizations. That's correct. Now, you have here two ways of describing the situation. One is, I would say the military way, to say, okay, it's premature to speak about the failure in Afghanistan. It's premature. We have to wait one year. And that's people close to the current administration who think, okay, you should not say it's not working because we don't know; it's counterinsurgency, it takes time and we need one year. The problem is that, you remember that in pre-2009, off the



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record and even on the record, people were saying, okay, we need 14 months, and in 14 we will know if the war is winnable or not. Do you remember that?

So I'm a little bit afraid that every time there is a problem, we ask more resources but now it's going to be over next year, so no more reinforcement, no more nothing. And we ask more time. So where are we going to stop? And I think that all what I have seen on the ground, all my colleagues working on Afghanistan are more or less sharing the same assumption that next year is going to be worse.

So if we wait, we could very well be in a situation where the Taliban will not be interested in negotiation because they will see the victory too there, you know; too close, you know. And for example, they will have seen that Kandahar is not working. They will have seen that we have no more reinforcement, that so next year will be weaker than this year. So that's the major problem, you know.

So the premature thesis in a way is extremely dangerous because it's going to – we should not wait one year to see what's of use on the ground, that it's not going to work. Okay, I think I answered the question.

[0:30:18.5]

MS. MATHEWS: I will take these two questions, but just as a follow up, it's certainly been widely written about that the results of the Marja offensive are disappointing, to say the least. But would you say that the U.S. military shares your view that the counterinsurgency strategy is not feasible given both the number of troops and the lack of a domestic partner, or is that still the official strategy in some new guise in Kandahar?

MR. DORRONSORO: I think that, first, everybody agrees, at least off the record that Marja is a failure. It's clear now. If after a few months you are not able – you are not able to clear the ground just to begin with, it means that it's not working. Plus, we have plenty of more technical indication that Marja is not working. Plus, the fact that the local population has a deep hatred – real hatred – against the British, so the British are leaving Helmand. And the relationship with the Americans is better right now but it's not going to stay like that very long. So, I think it's really – it's not feasible.

The second element is that we will never know if it's not feasible because nobody is going to do that. Kandahar is not counterinsurgency as described – as tried in Marja. It's totally different. It's not the same plan. It's not the same strategy.

So, my point is that we've discussed months and months about counterinsurgency, the shape, clear, hold, build strategy, okay, last autumn. And what's happening in Afghanistan right now, except Marja – what is done on the ground is not that, okay? It's not that.

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In the East, U.S. Special Forces are trying to build some kind of local militia but people are refusing to work for the U.S. Special Forces because it's dangerous. They don't want the U.S. soldiers in their villages for control reasons but also because it's too dangerous. In the South, obviously it's not going to work. And in other places in the country, you have a quick deterioration. And what is disappearing in Afghanistan is the state – the remnant of the state – all the Northeast, for example, here.

I don't say that it's Taliban land. It's not true. You don't have a lot of Taliban in these places, except you don't have state structure anymore. So what are back is the local commanders, people who are dealing with

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probably Alpha District. They have maybe 50 armed men. You know, these kind of people who are taking money from the local population who are extremely unpopular. That's what we are seeing more and more in these places, you know. Even if it's not the Taliban, it doesn't mean that the state is working.

So, no, the strategy as described by McChrystal is not what is going on, on the ground, and I don't know exactly what they are doing. I think it's a series of local experiments without real clearance, and that means for me it's the end. When we are not able to say, okay, we are using these troops to do that with this result in six months, we have to be extremely careful because we don't know exactly what we are doing.

[0:34:28.1]

MS. MATHEWS: Okay, right – go ahead.

Q: My name is –

MS. MATHEWS: It's on.

Q: Yeah, my name is – (unintelligible) – from the Voice of America, Afghanistan Service. I have two questions. First off, you suggested that if some negotiations are taking place, it should be through Pakistan because Pakistan has a lot of influence on Taliban. My question is, what keeps Americans and European allies from asking Pakistan to stop its interference in Afghanistan? This is number one question.

The second question is there reports that thousands of Taliban are moving in, inside Afghanistan from the northern Waziristan and Baluchistan to Afghanistan to neutralize the surge operations in Afghanistan.

So why not they are trying at least to prevent their infiltration to Afghanistan through all of these drones and all these sophisticated weapons that are at the hand of American soldiers? Thank you.

MS. MATHEWS: Thank you.

[0:35:46.8]

MR. DORRONSORO: On the second point, I have the same information, actually. I mean, my information is that actually it's more here, but probably also from Baluchistan, but clearly they are thousands of Taliban going in Afghanistan. It's both because it's spring and it's the time to come back to Afghanistan, but also because of the offensive. Yes, it's going to be extremely difficult.

Now, on the why – and the two questions are more or less the same on a different angle. You know, what happened in 2001 is that the U.S. had no real strategy because you had two solutions basically.

One solution was to put Pakistan in the Bonn agreement. Pakistan and the Taliban in the Bonn agreement somewhere. I mean, try to put everybody, have a large amnesty, but it was not – probably not doable for political reasons.

The second strategy was to be extremely harsh and clear with Pakistan when the Taliban leadership came back in Quetta during the winter of 2001, 2002 to say clearly to the Pakistan army, okay, now, the rules are that you are not a sanctuary. You are not going to give a sanctuary for the Taliban.

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It's not what happened, actually. So first, we did not put the Taliban or the Pakistanis in the negotiation. They were clearly not in the loop. So the Pakistanis feel totally ostracized. And second, there was no pressure on the Pakistanis to do anything about the Taliban leadership. So the clear conclusion was that the Taliban were able to regroup and reorganize and with some help from the ISI to go back within Afghanistan. So it's totally incoherent.

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Now, the situation is a little bit different. Since at least last year, I would say, the Pakistani military is a very ambiguous game. So on the one hand, they say we are doing things. But what they are doing is mostly against the Pakistani Taliban, not the Afghan Taliban. And second, they have a kind of working relationship with the U.S. Army and the U.S. administration to a certain extent. So they are always playing – edging, you know – playing both the radical movement they are still partially controlling and at the same time trying to have good relationship with the Americans.

So yes, I think it's not very – it's not very coherent policy from the United States. But at the same time, I think it's too late. You cannot ask now to the Pakistani army to close the border. First, I'm not sure that they can do it. To arrest the Taliban leadership is probably too late because if you just put them in jail, it doesn't mean the insurgency is going to stop in Afghanistan.

So at this point, I think it's better to use the Pakistani army to speak with the Taliban than to try to reverse all the policy because it would be a very difficult process. And you have also, Pakistani policy is not only about Afghanistan. It's also about nuclear weapons and so on and so on. So I think it's intractable, basically, so better to deal with the Pakistanis right now.

MS. MATHEWS: Okay. Let me take a group of those questions back in this corner. Go ahead.

[0:39:29.7]

Q: Sue Fleming with Reuters. You said that the U.S. should be a central player. Could you be a bit more specific as to what role exactly the United States could play? At what level? Would this be at some kind of peace powwow with Pakistan invited? I mean, how do you see that playing out because the United States – so far the Bush – the Obama, sorry – the Obama administration has been saying that it should be an Afghan-led process and they've been very reluctant to come out at all and say what sort of role they could play. And it seems that there's some discussion within the administration over what to do. I wondered what your thoughts were on that.

MR. DORRONSORO: First, what we know is that it's very difficult to speak to the Taliban if you don't speak to the Pakistanis. It seems to be the case. And the arrest of Mullah Baradar, I think, is a good example of that. So that's the first thing.

The second thing, as I mentioned before, it's difficult to think that Karzai is going to do something really serious about the negotiation. Look, for example, this peace jirga was supposed to be in the beginning of May and now it's going to be a little later. This peace jirga was handpicked by the people – the representatives were picked by Karzai. It's all his personal allies. I know in a few provinces at least I have the names and it's all people very close to the regime.

So what's the use of having a peace jirga when basically you're talking to yourself, you know? You need some kind of enemy to have a negotiation process somewhere, you know? So well, it's not going to work.

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[0:40:54.9]

Plus, the Taliban are quite reluctant to speak to Karzai because basically Karzai is not very powerful. You're speaking to Karzai, but actually the real – probably the real power in Afghanistan today is more Ahmed Wali Karzai. It's not exactly his half brother or people like Dostum or even, to certain extent, the Hazara Shia in the center, so with whom exactly are you talking, you know? So I think it's extremely important not to think that it's going to be a bottom-up process that people are going to negotiate like that jointly and whatever but to think that, first, we have an agreement.

It's easy to speak to the Pakistanis. We have an agreement and we need an agreement with the Pakistani army to shape the negotiation. And it's going to take months. I don't say it's going to be easy. But I say start – we should start now. We don't need, even, to stop fighting if the current offensive in Kandahar is there, you know. We are not going to stop it. But at least we should negotiate in the same time that we are fighting, you know. And then we can work on the ceasefire to have Taliban back in Afghanistan – the Taliban leadership back in Afghanistan. That will be a major, major advantage for us.

MS. MATHEWS: Yes. Right behind – go ahead.

[0:42:38.2]

Q: Clay Ramsay, WorldPublicOpinion.org. Welcome back. Just focusing on one part of your grand mosaic: the relations between the Taliban leadership and the al-Qaida leadership. You have written in the past, and indeed Taliban leaders themselves have described this as a relationship between highly respected colleagues that has gone on for a long time. It's hard to imagine the United States participating in a process where they don't see a cleavage occurring in some way between the Taliban and al-Qaida. So what do you do with – how do you sketch out that part of your scenario?

MR. DORRANSON: Yeah. First, hi, Clay. (Chuckles.) First, I think that on the paper, it's possible to have an agreement with the Taliban. The Taliban can very well sign a piece of paper saying that okay, Afghanistan will never be a base for an attack against the United States or basically other countries because India is a target even more than United States, I think.

So we can have the piece of paper. The real question is how do you get a concrete guarantee? How do you check that it's working? That's why I think we need some kind of a military base in Afghanistan. We need to be able to check and able to strike directly.

And that should be – that's going to be one of the key elements of the negotiation. And I'm not sure the Taliban are going to like it. But first, the bases can be in the North – more in the North or Kabul. I don't think it would be a good idea to have the bases in the South. And you know that we have drones. You can do a lot of things.

[0:44:38.8]

Second element, here, we have an objective agreement with the Pakistanis. We have the same objectives. We want the same thing. The Pakistanis are not happy with al-Qaida. Al-Qaida is extremely dangerous for the Pakistani establishment. You had bombings after bombings, you know, the last few years. So here, we can have

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cooperation with the Pakistani army and the Pakistani intelligence, so it could be also part of the deal.

But we need absolutely I think that the only thing that is important is to keep some direct means of intervention in Afghanistan on the border to strike specific targets. I think that's the only serious thing. The rest is just paper, you know.

Q: Gilles will find it – Marvin Weinbaum, Middle East Institute – Gilles will find it not at all surprising that I disagree with him on so many accounts that we would need another discussion. But let me focus specifically on the question of having the Taliban agree to negotiations assuming now they don't think that they're winning and they might as well continue with what they're doing.

It's almost a matter of – almost a truism that no Afghans trust the Pakistanis. And that includes the Taliban, knowing what we do about how the Taliban have been acting recently and how they have in the past. Karzai certainly doesn't trust them although he certainly is pursuing this route.

So really, my question is let's assume now that Taliban are willing to talk. Why would any Afghans really allow this to be managed by the ISI of all organizations? Why would Karzai, knowing that he was going to be marginalized not be a spoiler? And obviously, he has some cards to play.

[0:47:00.8]

Why would the northerners, the northern minorities like the Hazaras who are right in the crosshairs of the Taliban, why would they ever be a party to it, not to mention the other minorities? What would prevent this from becoming a civil war in very short order with the humanitarian crisis that would follow from that?

There are just so many other things that are involved here, even if we accept the premise, which I don't, that the Taliban are prepared to talk. We were talking to them, negotiating, trying to get them to negotiate right up to 9/11. I was only at the periphery of that. I can tell you that for them, it was all about a Shariah state. I don't think that that's changed.

MR. DORRONSORO: Yes, we disagreed a lot the last few years. I don't mind, I was right. (Laughter.) And I think we – I could mention a few discussions we have – and that's interesting that now the agenda is a little bit different, eh? But anyway, your question, as always, is quite interesting.

First, there is no guarantee – I never said there was a guarantee that the Taliban are going to negotiate. I just say we should try. And second, I absolutely think you're right when you're mentioning that there a lot of people who are not interested especially to deal with the Taliban. They prefer the current situation except – except – that they know that after the summer of 2011, the coalition is going to withdraw.

[0:48:48.9]

One way or another, it's clear that we are going to withdraw. And we are not going to go on like that with a war when we're losing – this year, we are going to lose probably 650 or 700 men. I don't think the European countries are going to run like that a very long time. And the situation is worse every year. And everybody agrees that this year, the situation is much worse than last year.

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So what is going – what could save us is that the people know that on the ground. I have never seen an Afghan optimistic; my last trip; never, never. I talk to a lot of people. Nobody – absolutely nobody – is thinking that the offensive in Kandahar is going to work. Not even when they're off the record, some officials.

So I would say that anticipation – yes, because the people in the North, at some point, they know that maybe it's better to have deal with the Taliban than to have a withdrawal where the civil war and a Taliban win is absolutely inevitable.

So a lot of people are going to be clear about that. They know that they have a lot of money. They won a lot of money with this war. They are using the Americans to make a lot of money. The Americans, basically, are fighting to protect, in some places, drug dealers, warlords, war criminals in the North. It's very comfortable for them, you know.

If you are Dostum, why not? You're a war criminal. You're an official in the regime and the U.S. is fighting for you. Plus, you're a former Communist; it's perfect, I mean. Why not? Why not? The promise that one day, the coalition is saying, okay, we have to leave one day or another, and so we are going to leave anyway and you know it. Then, people could be interested in negotiations.

[0:50:43.5]

And about the argument that the Taliban are interested in a kind of essential way just in taking part of the Shariah-based system, there are two elements. First, a lot of people in Afghanistan favor some kind of Shariah-based legislation, very broad, and you know that the fundamentalists are not just the Taliban in Afghanistan – very far from that.

And second, that the Taliban could at the beginning have this idea that they are going to take the (whole ?) power from the them and they could also change because the game is changing because probably they will have some personal advantage. In participating in government, they will be part of the game. It's a bet. My strongest argument is if not, what are you going – nobody is taking seriously anymore the – (inaudible). If it's not negotiation, what else? And here, there is no answer.

MS. MATHEWS: I see a hand in the back.

Q: Gareth Porter, Inter Press Service. Gilles, this is a very coherent sort of analysis, I think, consistent in many respects. But there's one element that seems, at least as I hear it, to be inconsistent with the rest of the analysis. And that is the idea that the United States could bargain for not just keeping troops in Afghanistan over a long period of time, but actually having military bases there on a semi-permanent basis.

Why would you think that it would be feasible to bargain with the Taliban to get them to agree to that sort of thing given their complete consistency over a long period of time in demanding a complete withdrawal as part of the deal?

[0:52:41.9]

MR. DORRONSORO: Well, that's a good point. That's going to be one of the key element – I mean the key problem in the negotiation. The first is what Marvin was saying. I mean, how do you put the Northern people in the game? The second is that, here, there are two things that make me very – I mean, slightly optimistic.

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First, is that probably Pakistan will not oppose to that. And the Pakistanis can put a lot of pressure on the Taliban basically, you know? I'm ready to bet that they know where is Mullah Omar. They can put a lot of pressure on the Taliban leadership. So I think Pakistan wants some kind of reasonable exit and a few bases in Afghanistan is not a big deal for them.

Second, it's where you put the bases. If you put the bases near Kandahar or on the Khost, well, I would say that it's – (chuckles) – probably a little provocative. But if you put the bases more in the neutral places in the North or even in Bagram, you know, which is not a place that is very politically leaning to the Taliban, I think it's doable.

So two elements: first, the Pakistanis; second, where you put the bases. And third, of course, it's bases – it's not the huge bases you see in Afghanistan right now. It's much more modest bases for special operations and with a very limited number of people. I'm not speaking about 20(000) or 30,000.

MS. MATHEWS: Gilles, if there – if the bases are where you just described, are they useful?

[0:54:30.5]

MR. DORRONSORO: Yeah, yeah, they are useful because the bases is not about intelligence. The bases is when you strike, you need – it's easier to have a base, actually; to have your helicopters, probably a few planes, things like that.

Intelligence is done for drones or for – you know? It's not about being close to – because you don't learn – especially in this context, you can have a base near Khost and you're not going to learn a lot about what's going on because you're just as isolated from the population anyway.

MS. MATHEWS: Yes. Hi, Tesi.

Q: Tesi Schaffer from CSIS. The thing that puzzles me in your argument is that I don't understand why given your enormous pessimism about the capacity of the United States, NATO and the Afghan government to hold their own in any meaningful way – why would it be possible for them to negotiate a deal with the Taliban that was any better than simply giving up? And I say this against the background of a fairly long history of Pakistani negotiations either with the Afghan Taliban or with the Pakistani Taliban, all of which failed fairly quickly.

[0:56:02.4]

MR. DORRONSORO: I don't agree with description – when you say “your amount of pessimism ,” you're missing the point that – I am the expression of a consensus and that's what is worrying basically. You cannot just say, oh you know this middle-age French academic is kind of leftist and he is very pessimistic about NATO. It's worse than that. Everybody is extremely pessimistic.

Q: That was not my question. My question is why.

MR. DORRONSORO: Yeah, but I think it's not your question; it's my answer. And I think the problem is not to have a perfect solution. The problem is not to say, okay, it's sure it's going to work. The problem is that there is no other alternative. You know?

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And so you can say again and again, well, maybe the Taliban are not going to accept the negotiation; maybe it's not going to be okay. But you never know before you try. And so we should absolutely stop this kind of – and for once, it's pessimistic, I think – this idea that nothing could never go out of a negotiation. It's not true, basically.

A negotiation is a discovery process. People are starting from one point and they are not at the end of negotiation exactly at the same point. And some very powerful players in the game want negotiation. And I don't think it's reasonable to think that the Pakistani army has no influence on the Taliban. And I think the Pakistani army want to deal with the United States and the coalition. So I think we have to try. We have to invent the negotiation process and we have, as far as possible, to be in control of the negotiation process.

[0:57:59.1]

The idea that Karzai is going to make a deal is very dangerous because first, what's going to be in the deal? Nobody is asking this question but if Karzai is making a deal with the Taliban, what are you putting in the deal? Who is going to talk about the guarantees we need against the return of al-Qaida? Who's going to do this job? It's not very clear to me.

So that's why I think the coalition will have 150,000 men plus all the contractors, so it's a huge economic and military presence, so we should absolutely shape the negotiation and not be in this very passive mood: Oh, okay, you know it's not going to work; let's put the Saudis and Karzai in that; it's a second track; it's not important. No, because what we see in Afghanistan right now is that with the military speaking, we are going nowhere, so we should shift the focus on the negotiation now.

MS. MATHEWS: I think that may be the last word. (Laughter.) Gilles, I think, agree or not agree, everybody is a good deal wiser than when they came and we thank you so much.

MR. DORRONSORO: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)