## **QI Panel:**

## **Two Years of Diplomacy with the Taliban**

## August 29, 2023 12-1 PM EST

**Adam Weinstein 00:47**

Welcome to everyone who's joined, I see that the virtual room has begun to fill up. So today's panel is two years of diplomacy with the Taliban. It's hosted by the Quincy Institute and I'm the Deputy Director of the Middle East Program here. If you're not familiar with the Quincy Institute, it's a think tank that bases its approach to US foreign policy on a theory of restraint. In other words, we would like a less militarized foreign policy and one that is more focused on diplomacy, and other forms of leverage. And we really have an esteemed panel today, we're joined by an excuse me, their their bios are so impressive after read them off. We're joined by Tripp Copeland, who worked as an intelligence analyst for the Department of Defense for over a decade and later served in the State Department for over four years. While at the State Department. He served for three years as a Foreign Affairs Officer for the office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan, reconciliation and Doha, where he engaged in face to face meetings with the Taliban. And then following the US withdrawal he served as the foreign affairs office officer at the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs at the office of Afghanistan affairs. We're also joined by John shoden, who is the director of the Center for naval analyses, countering threats and challenges program and you may remember him from past panels we've had on Afghanistan. And he deployed or traveled 13 times to Afghanistan during the US war there twice in support of the commander of AI SAF. And once in support of the commander combined security Transition Command Afghanistan. He also served as a strategic adviser to US Central Command. And last but not least, we are joined by schoolers are drawn. And she is a graduate student of Global Affairs at NYU. But she also served as the Afghan youth representative to the United Nations in 2020. And has five years of experience working with NGOs, focusing on Afghan IDPs immigrants, women, and children. She left Afghanistan in August 2021, during the withdrawal of US troops there. So today's panel is really going to be one that focuses on what's happened over the last two years and the path forward. I think there's been many pattern, many panels looking back at what led to the collapse of the Afghan government and the withdrawal of US troops. And we'll touch on that a little bit. But that's not going to be the main focus. scuze me one moment. There seems to be a technical problem with one of our panelists. If our tech people could message schooler she's she's having trouble hearing us. I'm sorry for those listening. But if our tech people could take care of that, that would be great. So while school is trying to figure out her audio, why don't we start with you, A John? It's two years since the US since US troops left Afghanistan and a lot has changed, obvious. Obviously, I don't think any of us fully envision that the Taliban would be completely in control of the country today and would have retained power. Given that difficult circumstance, what in your view are the main priorities of the United States government in Afghanistan today?

**Jonathan Schroden 04:32**

Yeah, that's a great question. And thanks again for having me back. Adam. It's great to be joining you and Tripp, Shkula as well. I mean, I think the US has two main priorities in Afghanistan today, the first being counterterrorism, which is an enduring us natural national interest in Afghanistan, obviously with the presidents of the Islamic State chorus on province ISKP, as well as remnants of al Qaeda as sort of international terrorist groups, and then you have a whole plethora of regional terrorist groups that are of interest to the United States as well, so that that sort of threat of terrorism is one major interest that the US has. The other is you could, you could, I think, lumped together a handful of other interests under the broader rubric of stability, right, US is interested in the stability of Afghanistan, the stability of the South Asian region. And under that rubric, right, the US points to things like pushing the Taliban to try and develop an inclusive government something that would minorities would would see themselves in and be invested in pushing for human rights, and especially the rights of women and girls, to go to school to be able to work etc. There are there are a bunch of other things that I think fall under this rubric of stability, but that inclusive government and women's rights, human rights are sort of the two pillars of that. So those two things, I think, are the US enduring interests in Afghanistan, which you still see the likes of Tom West and Rena Ameri working diligently to try and pursue day in and day out these days.

**Adam Weinstein 06:14**

So I guess, my follow up question to that is in the, in the ranking of these priorities, where do these all rank? I guess that would be my first question. And my second question would be, we always hear about women's rights. And I think, you know, the what's needed on that front is obvious. But we are at this point about an inclusive government. What does that really mean? The last government wasn't inclusive, in a sense. That's why there was an insurgency, I think the Taliban have this image in their head that we're going to have token inclusivity as long as we have one Hazara Taliban member, and maybe a couple of Tajik Taliban members. That's okay. That's inclusivity. What does inclusivity mean for the United States? And then where does it fall within these priorities? We have CTE, we have inclusivity, we have women's rights. I think we all know that the US doesn't approach those things on an equal, you know, basis, but maybe I'm wrong.

**Jonathan Schroden 07:07**

Well, I mean, I don't know that I have not seen anyone in the US government assign a priority ranking to those things. The sense I get is that at any given time, depending on what the developments are, that are that are ongoing in Afghanistan, one or the other of those may come to the fore as the immediate priority, if you will. But I'm not aware of any deliberate ranking of those in priority order on the part of the US government. Nor do I look at the activities, you know, it's not like Tom West is somehow senior to Amir Hamisi, or vice versa. They are both special representatives, in terms of their portfolios, and Afghanistan, and one, you know, focuses on security and engagement and financial aspects. And the other focuses specifically on women's rights, and they work together, you know, towards those priorities. So I don't I don't know that there is an explicit ranking, that one could point to, I think, the ebb and flow in terms of the level of effort and importance to us places on them. In terms of inclusivity it has to be more than tokenism. You're right, the Taliban did try early on to you know, have a single Tajik are a single Huizar. And in their government, I don't know if they thought that that would actually fly, but they tried it. And, of course, the international community was, you know, resolutely unimpressed with that effort. And the Taliban quickly abandoned even any pretenses of having token minorities in their government. So I think from the US perspective, you know, they haven't set quotas, it's not like the US has said, there's X percent of you know, Tajiks in the country, and therefore you need to have X percent of your government be, you know, be represented by Tajiks. So there is some amount of wiggle room in terms of what that would actually looks like in practice. But I think it's fair to say that more than none is a, you know, baseline definition, the US would have inclusivity with an upper bound of something approaching the relative distribution of population percentages, most likely, US would be satisfied with something in the middle. You know, anything beyond tokenism? I think the US would probably say, okay, that's looking acceptable at a minimum.

**Adam Weinstein 09:24**

Yeah. And that's the answer. I've heard from US officials and also from Pakistani officials. Pakistani officials, I've talked to will also say they including in the military will also say they want inclusivity in Afghanistan, because they see it as the only way to have long term stability. for them. It means ethnic representation. Sometimes when I talk to US officials, although I haven't heard this from the special representatives themselves, I hear them say that inclusivity has to mean more than just ethnic representation, it has to mean real participation by different groups. Nevertheless, the common thread is that in law As the Taliban form an inclusive political order, there's bound to be instability and their their rule is going to be challenged. Do you agree with that trip?

**Tripp Copeland 10:09**

I think the longer term that's probably right. However, in the short term, I think the Taliban is where the means of control to stay in control of Afghanistan, politically, in militarily, you know, I'll go back to this definition of political influence inclusivity, I think it's problematic that it's not sort of more well defined, in terms of what the international community is looking for. I sort of agree with all the points that Jonathan, you mentioned about talent, health and weariness of tokenism, and in trying to just sort of place, you know, ethnic minorities in their government, I think we should have won. This, along with all the other US priorities are really long term challenges. So while I agree, those are the goals and sort the interests and the objectives in the United States right now. To achieve those goals, we might focus on other areas of mutual interest, they're sort of of less priority to us to to get us to a place where we can have a more constructive conversation with the Taliban on these on these main priorities. I think we can have a conversation about what that approach with that strategy looks like a little bit later in this conversation. But going back to include inclusivity, I do agree it needs to be more than representation. I don't know exactly what that looks like in the Afghan context. But I think it'd A T be better if we could push the Taliban, again, very difficult to do. And it would take some time to codify somehow real political agency, in voice of regular Afghans in the decision making process, right, whether that looks like sort of a national consultant, sure. You know, sort of ad hoc, regional, consultative, sure, as you I don't know exactly what that looks like. But I think that that codification of real representation and voice and local agency has a much greater chance to facilitating a more stable Afghanistan in the future.

**Adam Weinstein 12:26**

Thanks for that answer. You know, we dove into the weeds a little bit, but actually wanted to ask schooler the first question, but we had some tech issues. You know, that's just part of the virtual panels. But I think the virtual panels also allow us to all be together, even when we're not in the same location. And we have, I can look at the attendees list, we have people from all over the world. So you know, you have to take the good with the bad. So schoola, we're talking about things from a policy perspective. For the you know, three of us who are on this panel. This is something that we think about from a policy angle, or maybe a national interests angle, or maybe a professional perspective, but it hasn't affected our lives the way it has yours. So I think we I just want to anchor this conversation from the beginning, which I wanted to do in the opening with acknowledging that it's, we're approaching the two year anniversary of the Taliban takeover. It's a month that's hard for most orphans. And I just wanted to ask you, what does this month mean for you as a as a young Afghan, who participated to some degree in the past government?

**Shkula Zadran 13:33**

Thank you so much for having me, Adam. As time passed, my understanding of events has deepened and my emotions associated with those events became complex. And but one thing never changed. August is always a reminder of the republic's collapse, not only the Republic's collapse, but the collapse of the entire generation, and their aspirations and dreams. August and the following years, stands as a historical lesson, and a compelling case study for scholars and academics that the end of an act of battle or war doesn't necessarily mean the establishment of long lasting and positive and meaningful peace Additionally, this month and events related to the this month, they just shows that they're just indication of a failed state building mission in Afghanistan, that can be again a lesson learned for the world. In terms of that, pouring money, unlimited money and and unlimited money in a country and bringing it supports from abroad isn't enough to build responsive institutions and states. And finally, I, one thing that I actually, like it's for me it's a very personal lesson learned is that that's true that democracies cannot be imposed by guns. And states can collapse very easily if the foundation of the state is not strong enough.

**Adam Weinstein 15:34**

You know, I think you said an interesting point there, which is that, you know, democracies and states cannot be upheld by a gun, but they can be dismantled by a gun. And we've talked a lot over the last two years. You and I have talked about this everyone on this panel? I think I've had individual conversations with you all about what the Afghan government did wrong. I think there's been 100 panels about what the Afghan government did wrong. But trip, you've been following the Taliban for at least a decade. What did the Taliban do? Right? Not from a moral perspective, of course, but from a strategic and operational and tactical perspective from, let's say, 2013 onward, that put them in a position where they're ruling the country today. Sorry that question was for Tripp, but you know, what Shkula, I'll give you the first word?

**Shkula Zadran 16:23**

Well, I answer this question very briefly. I think the the main reason the Taliban one was the public support for them and ruler areas, and invasion of Afghanistan by the NATO troops and American troops. It automatically created anti anti Niger and anti West sentiments and Afghanistan, between people. So Taliban use this opportunity use this and anti west sentiments in their favor. That's why they won.

**Adam Weinstein 16:56**

A follow up on that. So you're saying that the support for the Taliban was less because of who the Taliban wrre, and more because of what the Afghan government wasn't

**Shkula Zadran 17:07**

Exactly what the Afghan government wasn't and who were supporter of supporters of Afghan government was.

**Adam Weinstein 17:16**

Tripp?

**Tripp Copeland 17:19**

Yeah, I actually don't necessarily disagree with that. But as you said, there's been a ton of post mortems, written about the fall Republic, and most of which are focused on what the coalition did wrong with the Afghan government and wrong how basic essentially, we lost the war. Rather than rehash those points. I think it's useful discuss what Taliban did well, so I want to rewind a decade and go back to 2013, which were, I think, sort of one of the more consequential periods of war. We all know now that Mullah Omar the Taliban is first Emir died in April of 2013. And after his death, Akbar, Mohammed Mandsaur, the second Emir sort of shadow control the movement, it was an analysis of time, and really initiated a series of reforms that centralize and professionalize the Taliban in a way I don't think we really seen before making them an organization that could withstand coalition military campaign to the extent it was then after the withdrawal and 2014 and 2015. And competing to checkway point competing with the Islamic Republic, as a governing alternative. Mentor had really three major policy focuses. One was first is where diplomatically diversify away from Pakistan. And he maneuvered this UPC to effectively build the relationships and contacts really throughout the international community. But really, most importantly, deeply improve the relationship with the Iranians, again, receiving critical material support, to a lesser extent improved relationships with the Russians and the Chinese. Secondly, he improve the effectiveness of the Taliban military campaign by adding layers of bureaucracy, centralizing command and control in reducing reliance on local commanders in individuals, this allows the Taliban to use resources more efficiently to move fighters throughout the country in a way that we hadn't seen before us more easily. Pressure key strategic positions. And really, the direct consequence of this was the Taliban targeting and in some cases, taking control of provincial capitals from 2015 Onward. And then finally, I just mentioned about the governance piece, you can really renew your Taliban commitment to establish competent governance, in an attempt to be this viable alternative to the Islamic Republic, particularly in rural areas. In areas where we're generally more favorable toward the Taliban. Mentor expanded the Taliban, his civil service condition system and systems were broadly mirrored the Islamic republics ministries, installed competent bureaucrats later on, I think actually saw this help with a smoother transition to governing naturally takeover than we may have otherwise witnessed. Even today, I think we sort of underestimate the Taliban inability to cover well, I'm going to face a pretty severe resource constraints. So these reforms, again, along with our reduction forces, I think set the fundamentals for the rest of the war from 2013 2014. Onward, there were the Taliban gain control and influence over territory every year, and allow them to more easily take advantage of all the things mentioned in the post mortems, you know, endemic corruption, war weariness problems plaguing Afghan security forces, when the Taliban eventually changed their their policy preference for pursuing a political resolution, and decided to take the country through a series of local negotiated settlements and military force. I think I think it's instructive not only to like understand the context of the fall Republic, but also to understand the evolution of Taliban to you today to understand them as an organization to help us devise a strategy that increases the odds of achieving US interests and objectives.

**Adam Weinstein 21:13**

So I'm going to ask you a provocative question. And feel free to disregard it if you if you want to. But my impression, you know, is that my answer was a bit more sophisticated, and perhaps worldly of a leader than the current and near and that the current Emir is more a part of the clerical league perhaps, in comparison. And I wonder, you know, is there any, if we could go back and do things again, was it a mistake to kill Mansour? Or do you

**Tripp Copeland 21:46**

I think it was mistake that Mansour were I mean, counterfactuals? Hard? You never know. I mean, I don't necessarily know, you know, my score is sort of a political animal in and I think, by all assessments, sort of more pragmatic. I don't know, that means that he, he necessarily, would would sort of give-in or capitulate on Taliban core interests. I don't know how different negotiations would look, sort of the sort of the framework of the negotiations. But as you think about, you know, whether or not you engage with one interlocutor or another, I think you don't think about you think about increasing the chances of a better outcome, right. And I think, I think engaging with Mansour in at the time and sworn to chief was Ty Volga, who was also sort of more of a pragmatist and moderate, I think engaging with that crew increases the chances of a better outcome in Afghanistan, you know, the increases the chances of real political resolution, then then the to the crew we negotiate with.

**Jonathan Schroden 22:56**

I would just chime in real quick on that. And to Tripp's point, I don't know, you know, the counterfactual is, you can argue it one way or the other, certainly, depending on which you know, which direction you want to take it. I will say, though, at the time that Mansour was killed, I asked, you know, a bunch of people I knew in the US government at the time, whether they had thought through what the succession strategy might be, what the second and third order effects might be of that move. And the answer I basically got was not really they had the shot, and they took it. For what that's worth

**Tripp Copeland 23:28**

Well, yeah, I don't disagree me he had, you know, I don't disagree with that. I think the President has that shot. It's hard to say no, for sure.

**Adam Weinstein 23:37** In some sense, that's a metaphor for the entire war effort. But bottom line of what happened is that we the Taliban, were in an ascendant position. And then the Trump administration began to negotiate with with the Taliban. Screw that I wonder if you can put yourself back in the frame of mind you had maybe around that time between 2018 and 2020. When these negotiations are happening, what did you feel as a as a young Afghan at the time when the the US was beginning to negotiate with the Taliban and try to come up, hopefully, or at least they wanted a settlement to the conflict? I think you're on mute.

**Shkula Zadran 24:20**

So, um, between those years, obviously, I was very young, but they're very prominent and crucial year for me was that 2020 Because negotiations were at its peak, and I was the Afghan youth representative to the United Nations. My main responsibility was to advocate for meaningful peace and for inclusion of women and youth in those negotiations, and in short, I was advocating for the positive fees and we were afraid of whatever that is happening today. And I was amplifying Afghans voices and their concerns and demands regarding the peace negotiations. We were hopeful that the negotiations would include Afghan government and Afghans and our demands and our concerns. But unfortunately, it didn't happen. Everything happened behind closed doors. And well, there were multiple internal factors that contributed to weakening of the regime, mainly corruption and political turbulence. But I firmly believe that do happy sacrament was the main driver of the collapse of the Republic, and the collapse of Afghanistan and all that easements that we have made through all those decades. And it was supposed to protect the Republic, and protecting the Republic would mean protecting woman rights and all the achievements but it didn't happen. All the US cared about was well, we couldn't realize this back then. For at least, I personally, I was very optimistic. But now I realized that all the US really cared about was a safe exit. And then a a convenient deal for them. The Afghan government was excluded from the negotiations, and the concerns and demands of Afghans were overlooked. And finally, it happened. And as I mentioned, honestly, we will not expecting this to happen, because two decades is a very long time. And millions of trillions of dollars were invested in Vaughn Stan lives will, that will work costed millions of lives. And but unfortunately, it was a very reckless and a very, I would say selfish move from us. We were hopeful. But we were shocked when the actual deal came out.

**Adam Weinstein 24:30**

The views you express Shkula, I've heard from many Afghans and you know, a recap of the agreement. It was it did get exactly what you said, which was that it got the US in some sense of safe exit, leaving aside the ISKP attack that took 13 us servicemembers and 180, something Afghans, but the US troops weren't targeted. You know, I guess my first question is for your school, and then I have a follow up for trip. Do you think that the United States was honest about all of the rhetoric it had over the years that it told off bombs about you know, that this this, this support was about democracy building and we were going to stick with you? Or do you think it was political opportunism? Or do you think it was a bit of both?

**Shkula Zadran 27:55**

And it was political, political, like they were trying to show that they are like, supporting us, they're in there doing whatever that like, they should be in favor of us. But I think after a while, it got like, due to several reasons, mainly because of lack of efficient diplomatic affairs between between Afghan government and US government. It got failed. And I believe that as the deal was supposed to like, I remember Alizad said that nothing will be agreed until everything is agreed. But eventually, nothing was agreed. The only thing that was agreed that the Treasury of Afghanistan should not be used against us national interests or its allies national national interests. So I think it was a to some extent, they were really trying to do but they didn't do they didn't know how to do it effectively. But after a point. I think they started just they started dodging and they started just acting reckless.

**Adam Weinstein 29:09** Okay, thank you for that and trip. Let's talk about the deal a little bit from a from a US perspective. In some sense, we got a lot for the deal. The Taliban were in an ascending position. Militarily, they stopped targeting US troops. I think two years soldiers had been killed in insider attacks just before the Doha agreement was signed. And then the attack ceased, even though the US continued to enable the Afghan security forces continue to conduct airstrikes, which of course, were pretty deadly for the Taliban. But the Taliban were disciplined enough at least so far as dealing with US troops that they didn't target US troops. And the, you know, the United States got its exit from Afghanistan, of course, like most deals, designed to no end to conflict. It was not a completely balanced deal. I think it could be objectively argued that the deal offered the towel upon a little bit more than it offered, certainly more than it offered the Afghan government and in some ways, it gave them a bit of an advantage. Is that the result of bad negotiating? Or is that the result of the reality that the Taliban were in an ascendant position? And this is the reality of the deal we could get?

**Tripp Copeland 30:22**

Yeah, Going going back to what I said about sort of the evolution of the Taliban over those for decades, decade prior. Again, I really think that plus some policy decisions, including withdrawal, you set the fundamentals for the war. When we started negotiating 2018, we were in a tough position. Militarily, the Taliban gained gained advantage shown throughout the countryside and pressured a bunch of provincial capitals throughout the country, including the North. They took over conduit a couple of times throughout the war, so they were they were a good negotiating position, relative to when talk started, right. I mean, this, it sounds like this is the first time we started talking to Taliban, we've been talking to the Taliban, for the better part of a decade, about a potential political solution, you know, coming pretty close in 2013, where the the first step on negotiations were in a much stronger position, in terms of our leverage to negotiate negotiate a better deal. That said, you know, the deal has, you know, a lot of, as you mentioned, a lot of things we had won, including a lot of like, very specific commitments on with the Taliban were due on counterterrorism to protect the United States allies and the Taliban have expanded that commitment, you know, basically to the entire entire world. And maybe most importantly, and something we were we were shooting for, and I think one of the reasons why we started to have this conversation about the international question when the Taliban first was because it was the way to get the Afghans in the same room together, is way to get the Islamic Republic in the Taliban to sit down to formal public talks, sanctioned by their leadership. For the first time ever. We obviously there have been sort of secret talks and, you know, fits and starts about processes and in back channeling about maybe a political resolution. But But these two parties have never sat down in formal public talks before. In the Doha agreements were paved the way for that he gave the Afghans opportunity to to in the war through political resolution in the war peacefully. It didn't turn out. Yeah, sometimes diplomacy doesn't work. But you know, for the for the faults that are out there in the public about Doha deal. Do you Afghans opportunity to come to a to a political resolution?

**Adam Weinstein 32:49**

Somebody said in the questions that the Afghan government that the Afghan government didn't take this process seriously. Do you think that's, you know, also hear other Afghan say, look, they had their hands, they were they had their hands tied behind their back. They didn't have any leverage, you know, Shkula pointed out, a lot of these talks were happening without them. By the time they were included. The Taliban were completely intransigent. It took the Taliban and the Afghan government months to even agree to a set of rules for talking, let alone talking substantively. Did the Afghan government squander this opportunity? Or was it an opportunity that just they didn't really that wasn't there for the taking to begin with?

**Tripp Copeland 33:34**

I don't see how they didn't see this coming in. This was going to be sort of the policy pushing policy outcome from the United States, three presidents had talked about, you know, withdrawing from Afghanistan, had talked about political resolution had opened and continued, you know, talks, talks with the Taliban. In to the I understand that the Afghan government was not a signatory to Doha. But they were in we were in constant communication with the with the Afghan government with with President Ghani and his team, Ambassador fields. I was in Doha. I don't want to mistake this or get this wrong. But, you know, almost every month in 2019, debriefing the Islamic Republic on what was going on in Doha, not only talking to Ghani and his team, but other other leaders throughout the government security leaders included, they were A T well briefed on what was happening throughout the process. So to the extent that they're unprepared, I just, I don't see how that could be the case. I think that's sort of on them on they didn't they didn't see this coming in terms of how it talks ended up and they were kind of slow. I think there was there was some reason on both sides. That they would want us slow that process. One I think the guy administration spa change administration is is a way to maybe pitch at a different policy approach. And so they had some incentive to delay the latest talks in the Taliban, you know, again, going back to my previous comments, saw that they were year by year progressing on the battlefield. So they didn't necessarily have an incentive to quickly come to a conclusion either. Um, that said, these processes do very often take years. So that, you know, to think that we're going to get a solution, and you're super quickly, I think was a bit misguided. Anyway, that the timing worked out where the incentives were in place to promote parties is where it slow roll that a little bit.

**Adam Weinstein 35:38**

Got flow rolled, the US withdrew as the US was withdrawing, the Taliban took over the country, the rest is history. Let's try to spend the last 25 minutes of this looking about what's happened since then. And looking forward. John, you and I both discussed the US dub on agreement, ad nauseam. What's interesting to me is that the Taliban themselves in the statements they make still reference it. Now, you could make a case that they violated many aspects of it. And you could even make a case that at least in the run up to the withdrawal, the US violated some aspects of it as well. And of course, that's true for most agreements like this. But it seems to me that the Taliban still like to think that the Doha agreement is in effect, do you think and by the way, hello, Zod is constantly talking about the Doha agreement and seems to be attached to it and still sees it very much as a roadmap. Does the Doha agreement still have value today?

**Jonathan Schroden 36:40**

I think I mean, a short answer is yes. But a more nuanced answer is when you say, does it have value today? You know, you're saying sort of like does it have value for whom? Right. And I think when you, you know, when you look at the Taliban side, your comment was the Taliban say it still has value. I think there are certain parts of the Taliban, certain members of the Taliban who says it has value, right. The Taliban spokesperson says it has value the Taliban, you know, diplomats, if you want to call them that, you know, the folks that that sort of came from the political, you know, wing, the Doha office, etcetera. They're the ones who say that it has value. You know, has the supreme leader of the Taliban declared that the the, you know, the agreement with the US has value, not to my knowledge. So there are there are some elements of the Taliban that say it has value. And it looks to me like those are the elements of the Taliban, who were sort of the part of the political weighing part of the Doha office, part of the ones who negotiated this agreement to begin with, right, and so it has value for them. I'm sure from strong strategic view, right? These these are also the sort of members of the Taliban, if you will, who still believe that international recognition is important that it would have value for the Taliban to be internationally recognized, that they could have a relationship with the US and the rest of the international community in a way that is akin to how other countries behave right, and are recognized and interact. So there is that part of the Taliban that sees value in that type of political future for the country. And for them, the agreement has value. I'm less convinced that the more militant parts of the Taliban see it the same way. Right. And similarly, you know, on the US side, for example, yes, the people who negotiate who are involved in the negotiations of the agreement, you know, most notably, Khalil Zod, say that the agreement still has value that it still represents, you know, the coming together of the two sides in a way that can be built upon going forward. But I don't hear that type of language coming out of the current administration. I don't hear Tom West. I don't hear you know, Secretary Blinken talking about the US Taliban agreement as something that is foundational on which we can build our engagements with them going forward. So I wouldn't say it's devoid of value. I think there is still some value there. But I think the value depends greatly on, you know, sort of which specific audience you're talking about.

**Adam Weinstein 39:26**

Shkula, John mentioned something which I often hear in US policy circles, which is a distinction between the more pragmatic Taliban let's sometimes they're called the Doha Taliban, or the folks who are close to Vardar. And the less, you know, even today, people will say, So Roger Dean Heliconias, pragmatic, which he wasn't viewed that way in the past, necessarily. And then there's people like the Taliban that are close to the Emir that the Kandahar a Taliban, the hard line Taliban, and we'll make this distinction as an afghan. Do you see a distinction or or do you see the Taliban? You know, in one way? And do you think there's Do you think the top there's some Taliban who can be worked with and others other Taliban who are beyond the pale? How do you view it?

**Shkula Zadran 40:11**

Um, I personally believe there is no serious distinction between the Taliban. And at the end of the day, they all believe they all have a set of common values, beliefs, and whatever they have fought for all those two decades. But yeah, in terms of like, some of the Taliban, they understand the value of interaction with international community, and that they won't survive for too long if they do not get the recognition. In terms of interaction with international community, there are Taliban that that are like, different from the rest of them. But in terms of Internal Affairs, how to govern Afghanistan, how to lead Afghanistan in future political inclusion, human rights woman's right, I think all of them are conservative, and all of them are very extremist. So I mean, if they are like distinctions that would be just like, in terms of interacting with international community to some extent, just to get what they want to have. But otherwise, they're I personally believe that all of them are the same.

**Adam Weinstein 41:33**

Tripp, you are a part of the international community that has negotiated with the Taliban. One, maybe you could just tell us, what is it like to negotiate with the Taliban? And two, do you think there's ways out that outside leverage that that the world has with the Taliban? Do outside actors have the ability to shape the Taliban movement in any way?

**Tripp Copeland 41:59**

Two, two great questions and maybe maybe longest answers. So I'll take the pick the first one about what it's like to negotiate with the Taliban. And that might inform a little bit of the second answer, but sort of, you know, we're, it's frustrating, right. But I think you sort of knew that going into negotiation, is it like striking this deal that considered interest objectives, both sides would be really challenging and frustrating, like I said, before the United States and talk to the Taliban for the better part of a decade going forward with like, little little progress and political resolution. In this many years, we know the Taliban have this really slow and consultative decision making process. It doesn't really hear to counterparts timelines. And so negotiations were pretty long and grueling. You know, at the end of the process, we're negotiating like on a daily basis beyond midnight, making a really tiresome days. But there's there's policy debates and observing that diplomatic dance and struggle to advance our interests in negotiations isn't really what I'll take away from from being a part of that team. And observing that what I learned and grew to deeply appreciate is the importance for understanding your counterpart or more human level, particularly one that the country the country been at war with, for decades, rather than understanding them through the sort of narrative produced by decades of war and misunderstandings, more practically talking to them and trying to understand them at that level, is the really the only way to build good strategies and policies that have a chance to advance those interests that we're talking about. And so it's those sort of more human interactions that I remember, you know, despite our different worldviews and interests and objectives that we have, and the shared humanity, that despite regrettable action on both sides, and people in that room, the leaders who had sanctioned the talks were trying to charge a better way for toward a political resolution. So it's the it's the shared meals and the shared stories about families, and then conveying that they want peace and wanting to return to their homeland, and even sort of quiet conversations on the sidelines about, you know, different policies and sort of understanding and demonstrating that there are, there's a wide range of viewpoints within the Taliban, like they may be put on a pretty cohesive base and, you know, the state of politics, you know, Taliban piracy is pretty consistent over time. But there is a lot of room for policy flexibility with within the Taliban. And so, I know that sounds sort of like fairly basic diplomacy, one on one, but I think we lacked that sort of understanding of the Taliban only had an occasionally interactions with them. Over the years and the occasional interactions were pretty narrowly scoped to a group of us interlocutors that really helped lead to poor policy decisions over the course of the war. So I think I'll leave it at that unless you have any follow up so in that particular answer But there are some lessons learned that so that's sort of like what it is negotiating Taliban are my perspective. Think And, but there's some lessons that I learned from observing negotiations. And so its first lesson is, and this is sort of a broader lesson of our engagement with them during the war is they're really willing to absorb high costs and movement to achieve their goals. And so as a result, natum, a new written about this punitive actions and threats should be weighed less as a viable option in determining sort of engagement strategies. Like I understand the need for a multifaceted diplomatic formula that includes the characteristics, but we really think should prioritize carriers right now, in the near term, developing a recipe that builds constructive and cooperative relationships. The more the world pressures the Taliban, the more likely their position will attract. I think that's sort of a lesson well learned over the last 20 years, right. Second lesson is the Taliban need a little bit more international exposure. This is not to say, have bad diplomats, they don't. But they they're not as familiar with the use of processes and constraints of the international system. And for international organizations, they lack that institutional understanding of international organizations. And so the international communities do a really good job of educating them on how difficult it is to do some of the things they want, right. And this is particularly important in the sanctions relief or sanctions, conversation. So some education needs to happen from the international community, to the Taliban, about how that works, and what the constraints are there and how far multilateral engagements on this issues are in Lastly, and I mentioned this earlier, the Taliban doesn't rush timelines for deliverables and actions, their timelines are always far slower than their counterparts. So you just have to maintain patience as the Taliban works through difficult policy processes. Right. Just because they're not making a decision on our timeline doesn't mean there's not necessarily necessarily a lack of policy space. It may mean that, but the timeline doesn't necessarily tell us that. Right. And sort of at the same time, we should remember, and this goes back to sort of your previous question, to draw finish, put the Taliban there. It's not a monolith. There is a lot of policy space among different Taliban on a set of issues, including women's and girls. But there are real limits on their policy flexibility is a balanced engagement with the world in different domestic local constituencies. And right now, you know, that balance is tilted Well, in favor of sort of the former fighter constituency, right. So that's why you're seeing less political or policy flexibility. It doesn't mean it won't be policy flexibility, in the longer term.

**Adam Weinstein 47:37**

Yeah, as an example of that, it seems like Mullah Baradar is reduced to cutting ribbon ceremonies for new roads and things like that, even though you could make the case that he was one of the Taliban most responsible for their victory in some sense. And he was also there from the beginning. I guess a question I have for you. A quick follow up trip is that people have criticized the US war in Afghanistan by saying the US thought 21 year wars and never thought about the big picture. Are we doing the same thing diplomatically? Now, thinking about things year by year when perhaps this is a generational struggle, in a sense?

**Tripp Copeland 48:16**

Hmm I don't think so. I think we have a little bit better perspective. Now. And I my sense is that the folks who are engaging in Taliban understand, so it's a longer term struggle. I'm encouraged by recent meetings, to the extent we know what happened in sort of the public. The public messaging on this, that folks are focusing on ways to build confidence and trust with the Taliban, rather than in trying to sort of achieve these like really achieve our state objectives, which are really difficult to do with the Taliban in the short run, they're really politically sensitive within the organization are politically sensitive with in both systems. And so this this move to, as we saw in Tom Westport, messaging, this move to talk about CPMs seems like maybe a move to build trust and have conversations where you can build a better relationship with Taliban, in better achieve those longer term objectives. Later on, seems to be like there is there is a better perspective about taking a long view on this and not trying to just, you know, achieve what's what's very difficult, in the short run.

**Adam Weinstein 49:38**

Thanks for that. Um, I'm going to switch gears for a moment as there might be a little bit abrupt but as usual, this hour is flying by John. I don't think we can finish this panel without talking a little bit about CT. We've talked about what diplomacy is like with the Taliban. We've talked about the Taliban themselves. But what about CT? I mean, this is What the Bush administration, Bush Administration's invasion of Afghanistan was all about. People forget this. But the Bush administration did give Mullah Omar several warnings. The ISI chief at the time back in 2001, gave Mullah Omar several warnings, whether we want to accept this or not. The reality is that the United States at that time, at least for a couple of weeks, was willing to live with the Taliban, so long as they delivered al Qaeda, of course, Mullah Omar thinking he had all A T A the time in the world, as Tripp has said about the Taliban and their sense of time, just remarked to the ISI chief that he would think about it and the rest is history. But is, is the Doha agreement, living up to its ex living up to expectations so far as CT? Do you think the Taliban have been a reliable CG partner? They seem to have fallen short on most other accounts, at least so far as human rights and women's rights and inclusivity and things like that? How are they doing on CT? And how can the US protect its interests?

**Jonathan Schroden 51:07**

Sure. So there's a lot there were a lot of statements with question marks there. So let me move back up.

**Adam Weinstein 51:13**

I'm looking at the clock. I'm panicking.

**Jonathan Schroden** **51:15**

Yeah, no, I understand. Let me unpack that as quickly as I can. First let me let me say the Taliban are not a counterterrorism partner of the United States. And that word gets thrown around, I think a lot of times pejoratively, especially by people who are anti engagement with the Taliban, right? They call it the the sort of hear that term used pejoratively by two camps. One is the anti engagement crowd, and the other is the Taliban or terrorists themselves crowd. Right. And they'll criticize this idea of relying on the Taliban as a as a counterterrorism partner, the US is not doing that. Let's be clear, right? The US has its own over the horizon counterterrorism platform that it is using to monitor developments inside Afghanistan as best it can. It was that capability that struck Imanol Zawahiri in Kabul and killed him right, a year or so ago. So the US is not relying on the Taliban as a as a partner for counterterrorism. Now, there's a lot of rumors circulating that, you know, perhaps the US is occasionally giving the Taliban intelligence right. There have been various meetings between CIA officials and senior Taliban officials that are publicly known whether that's happening or not, I can't say, right, I, I honestly don't know. But there are those rumors, right. And it wouldn't surprise me if there is some amount of hey, you know, we're seeing this, could you do something about that. But that type of, you know, tit for tat or limited intelligence exchange, if it's occurring, is still a pretty far cry from someone being a partner of yours in counterterrorism. Right. So I would I would start there. That said, the Taliban themselves have, interestingly evolved over the last two years to become a much more effective counterterrorism force, if you will, then they were in August of 2021. Right. I mean, the immediate aftermath of their takeover, they, they went after the Islamic State, in Afghanistan, and they did so in very heavy handed, you know, sort of brutally suppressive, large area sweeps, you know, type operations, that really angered a lot of the people in the areas that they went into. And they weren't particularly effective. In fact, I wrote an article, you know, a year or so ago with Colin Clark, in which we call them brutally ineffective. Interestingly, though, over the course of 2023, what we've seen is the Taliban have moved away from these heavy handed large area sweeps. And they have moved to what look like, again, from the outside, I haven't obviously been in Afghanistan to observe these operations closely. But as best I can tell, what they're engaging in now are Intel driven raids against specific targets that they've identified, as, you know, housing me being a safe house for some number of Islamic State terrorists, and they appear to be pretty effective in conducting those rates. You know, we saw earlier this year, the amount of media output that the Islamic State was putting out, for example, took a huge nosedive. The the number of attacks that, you know, total numbers of attacks that the Islamic State has conducted in Afghanistan have gone way down this year. So by the various metrics that one might look at, you know, the Islamic State appears to have been significantly degraded over the course of this year by the Taliban. So again, you know, the extent to which the US is helping him in that regard is publicly unknown. And anything you read about that is pure speculation. But the fact remains the Islamic State is under Zawahiri a fair amount of pressure from the Taliban right now. And Al Qaeda, contrary to a lot of what you know, sort of alarmist predictions, has not reconstituted itself in Afghanistan, I mean, it, it still has not announced who the successor to is Allah, here he is, as the leader of al Qaeda. Most people assume most analysts that I know assume that say Fal-Aldal, has taken over de facto leadership of the organization. But those same analysts primarily assume that he's still located in Iran under some form of house arrest. So Al Qaeda as an organization, al Qaeda, Central, if you will, is largely defunct at this point in time.

**Adam Weinstein 55:43**

Okay, thanks for that. You gave a really great summary, which makes up for the fact that we don't have too much time for follow ups, because I'm going to ask you a question. If you can keep it to a couple minutes, that would be great. And then we might go one or two minutes over, and we'll do a quick lightning round for final thoughts. Truly, you lived in Afghanistan until August 2021. During those years leading up to the collapse, sometimes I'd hear different things from Afghans inside Afghanistan and Afghans outside of Afghanistan. And now you're part of the diaspora. And there's divisions within the diaspora to the point where I have to applaud you for agreeing to come on this panel, because it can be a brave thing to do. How should US diplomats and US policymakers balance the views of the Diaspora that you're now now part of I know, not by choice. And those Afghans who are effectively voiceless who remain inside Afghanistan?

**Shkula Zadran 56:44**

What right the diaspora of Afghanistan is divided into two parts. First, the recent immigrated immigrant immigrants to West or U.S. And the second is like to those who left Afghanistan earlier. Both of them are to some extent unfamiliar or disconnected from the ground realities of Afghanistan. But one thing is common between them. All Afghans, and diaspora and also in within Afghanistan, they want election, they want a democratic regime, they want political inclusivity. They want every ethnic group to be part of the government, and they want women to be part of the government. So for US government, and for US diplomats, or for the foreign policy. Makers, I think it's good to stay connected with Afghans, within a one understand an outside Afghanistan, considering the common common points that are the common ground that they both have. And unfortunately, US diplomats are not effectively engaging with Afghan diaspora and Afghans within the country, whatever they are doing, for example, Rena, I mean, we are done with those people, I think they are not doing sufficient job, they are just showing of that as if as if they are engaging with diaspora and, and Western, you know, Afghans within the country, but if they really want to carry on the job, effectively, I think there are some common things between both Afghans that they that they can work for, for example, they can start engagements with with the Taliban, and finally persuade them to go towards elections, A S because the election is the only way to get to a legitimate and inclusive and democratic government. Otherwise, I think this situation will continue and we will, we will not see any positive changes.

**Adam Weinstein 58:48**

Hey, thank you for that answer. We're gonna do a quick lightning round, we might go one minute or two minutes over. So try to keep it to 30 seconds, if you can. Imagine you're in a room with Tom West, or Rena and Mary or somebody who's handling the Afghanistan portfolio I know for. I know, for some of you, that's not even something you have to imagine it might actually happen. But if you had 30 seconds to give them advice about what to do next, I'm going to do something that we don't like to do in Washington, which is to give a policy prescription that that that is on the record. You have 30 seconds with them. What would you say? How about we start with you drip?

**Tripp Copeland 59:32**

To the extent possible, quiet your pope messaging and particularly a woman's women and girls. You know, amplify bulk messaging only raises stakes and restricts policy options on the Taliban side. To meet more often with Taliban and senior officials, to the extent possible to try and press to renew the travel waivers to Taliban senior officials can travel more easily. Three, use engagement to operate on less politically safe same issues, I think we may be seeing the source of that, including current counternarcotics, utility programming, disaster relief, you know, trafficking persons, you know, a bunch of things that are mutual interests to show the showed to the Taliban initiated Taliban, they were willing to cooperate with the group. And that sincere cooperation is in their interest thinks this will help achieve those sort of longer term policy objectives. And fourth, use engagement to expand your reach into the Taliban, building associations with the group sort of mid level bureaucracy setting up a productive and working relationship with the next generation Taliban leaders.

**Adam Weinstein 1:00:38**

John?

**Jonathan Schroden** **1:00:40**

Yeah, that was a great answer trip. On top of that, I guess I wouldn't start by saying set your successor up for success. recognize there are contrary to what you will hear the debate around DC, there are no quick fixes to the problems that exist in Afghanistan. There are no policy prescriptions that we could put in place that will magically make things the way we want them to be in a year or two years from now. Right? At best, we could hope for evolutionary changes in the Taliban policies over the next 10 to 20 years. And that's a really hard thing to say to people in DC, because that's not the way they like to think. But that's how that's that is the nature of the situation. So the best thing that Tom West arena can do, is to stop, not think about what it is that they can accomplish during their time. But how can they move the ball A T A J down the field and set whoever comes up after them to continue to do that? And the person after that as well, right? What can you do to set up your successor for success? That's the mindset they need to have.

**Adam Weinstein 1:01:46**

Shkula, why don't you close it out for us?

**Shkula Zadran 1:01:49**

Well, first of all, the priority should be Afghan woman, they should work with the Taliban, negotiate, engage with the Taliban and persuade them to remove the sanction, remove the bans and restrictions on girls education and women's work and woman's political and social participation. Second, I strongly believe that the United States and their allies should not engage with the notorious corrupt Afghan government authorities. And also the third point would be that, while they are engaging with the Taliban are having negotiations with the Taliban, there's a very, there's there's a very thin line between negotiating and between giving someone leverage or momentum. So that should be like, like they should not make them make Taliban feel that feel, feel that powerful that they will make start making demands, because the Taliban are not in a situation, they also need international recognition and the support of the United States. So that should be maintained. And engagement should be done in a way that, again, that the demands and concerns and needs of Afghans should be met the otherwise I think it will be another mistaken waste of time.

**Adam Weinstein 1:03:12**

That's a good point, especially that the Taliban still needs USAID and things like that. Well, thank you, everyone, for joining. I've learned a lot from you all. I think we could go on another two hours, but we'll have to save it for another panel. Thanks to the guests who stayed on a few minutes over as well. We tried to get to some of the q&a questions, but we didn't get to all of them. We have other panels coming up. So just go to the Quincy Institute website, Quincy nc.org, or just search Quincy Institute and go to the events page, and you can register for them. Well, anyway, thanks for joining and I hope you all join again. Thank you. Thank you.