

Walk Away from the Taliban, Not Afghanistan

Overwatch Podcast Transcript



Featuring *David Petraeus and Vance Serchuk*

APRIL 24, 2020

General David H. Petraeus (US Army, Retired) and Vance Serchuk speak with ISW Founder and President Dr. Kimberly Kagan on the dangers of the US deal with the Taliban. They assess what the United States must do in Afghanistan to secure its national interests and prevent another 9/11. The US strategy in Afghanistan has been costly and unsatisfying - but also reasonably successful in preventing another terrorist attack on the homeland. The United States has made a peace deal with the Taliban in order to extricate its forces from Afghanistan, but it will soon lose the means to compel the Taliban to fulfill its part of the bargain. Should the United States pull its military out of Afghanistan anyway? Will the Taliban prevent international terrorists from returning? If so, can the United States counter terrorists in Afghanistan from afar?

Kimberly Kagan:

This is Overwatch. A podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. This is Kim Kagan founder and president of the Institute for the Study of War.

It is my great pleasure to welcome today to the Overwatch podcast, general David H Petraeus, former commander of the international security assistance force in Afghanistan, former director of the CIA and a member of ISW's board of directors. I also welcome my good friend and colleague, Vance Serchuk, a foreign policy expert who served with me on the congressionally mandated Syria study group and he worked for many years on Capitol Hill as the senior national security advisor to Senator Joseph Lieberman, the two of them today will be discussing their recent article in foreign affairs, "Can America trust the Taliban to prevent another 9/11." It is a great pleasure to have you both with us today. Thank you for joining us. General Petraeus, what are America's national security interests in Afghanistan?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus:

Well, they're pretty straight forward. They're essentially why we went to Afghanistan in the first place and why we have stayed. We went to Afghanistan to eliminate the sanctuary in which Al Qaeda planned the 9/11 attacks and conducted the initial training of the attackers at a time when the Taliban controlled the bulk of that country. And we have stayed to prevent Al Qaeda from doing what they have sought to do repeatedly, which is to reestablish that sanctuary in Eastern Afghanistan. And now of course the Islamic state, would like to do the same. Over time to be sure Afghanistan has also become a very useful platform, if you will, for the regional counterterrorism campaign conducted by the United States. It's well known, for example, that the operation that resulted in the death of Osama Bin Laden was launched from Eastern Afghanistan. But at its heart, again, it is to ensure that Afghanistan is not, once again, the host of a sanctuary in which Al Qaeda or now the Islamic State, could plan terrorist attacks against our country or indeed against the countries of our allies.

Kimberly Kagan:

Vance, has the United States achieved anything after two decades of fighting in Afghanistan?

Vance Serchuk:

Well, Kim, you know, I think that if you think back to the days after September 11th, 2001 if you can go back to

that moment, imagine telling yourself that nearly 20 years later we would not have any further catastrophic terrorist attacks on our Homeland and that the costs for doing so though would be that we'd have to remain engaged in Afghanistan militarily for that time. I think that most people certainly then would've said that that that would have been an acceptable outcome. You know, the, the truth is we have achieved something quite significant. We just as Dave said, uh first succeeded in eliminating the terror sanctuary that Al Qaeda was able to establish there while the Taliban controlled the country. We've prevented it from being re-established. And then when Al Qaeda attempted to regenerate on the other side of the Afghanistan, Pakistan border, our presence in Afghanistan enabled us to be able to, to smash that terrorist infrastructure there too.

So as a result, for nearly 20 years, we have not had that kind of terrorist threat materialize from the Afghanistan, Pakistan region. I think that's a very significant accomplishment. And ultimately the the core reason, just as Dave said, that we went to this region in the first place and the aftermath of 9/11 I would also say though, although it was not the primary purpose for our going to Afghanistan in 2001, the fact is that Afghanistan itself for all of the problems the country faces, for all the violence, the terrible violence and bloodshed that still takes place there, the country has also evolved quite considerably. I think Afghans themselves deserve the overwhelming credit for the evolution of their country over the last two decades.

But the fact of the matter is, when you think back to 2001, you know there were no Afghan girls in school. You know today there are over 3 million Afghan girls who go to school. There were no Afghan women attending university today. There are over a hundred thousand Afghan women attending university and so you know, for all the imperfections, for all the problems, for all the pathologies that afflict Afghanistan, we know them very, very well. I think that we also should not dismiss the very real human progress that has taken place in that country over this period of time. Thanks, in large part to the presence, the involvement, the engagement of the United States, and indeed our international allies as well.

Kimberly Kagan:

Don't the United States and do its allies need to keep fighting in Afghanistan? Is it necessary to retain that military presence? There are a lot of people who say that the United States must get out, citing endless Wars. Is Afghanistan one of them?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus:

Well, there's no question that Afghanistan has been a very long war and arguably our longest war, although we certainly had troops deployed in foreign soil for far longer than we've had tens of thousands of troops in soil since world war II, tens of thousands in the Korean peninsula since the secession of hostilities. There were tens of thousands of troops in Japan for many, many decades as well. And let me say up front, that no one wants to end endless wars more than those who have actually fought those endless wars and know the sacrifice that they entail. But we need to end these wars the right way. We need to ensure that our objectives will be secure, that our, our missions will still be achieved in doing so. Keep in mind that often we say we're going to end an endless war, but we're actually not doing that. What we're really going to do is end our involvement in an endless war and in many cases the war will continue.

I remember hearing, for example, Washington would say, we are ending the war in Iraq and I almost wanted to raise my hand and say, excuse me, we're actually not ending the war in Iraq, we're our involvement in the war in Iraq, the war will go on. It's just going to go on without us, and if we don't do this the right way, we may end up having to return our forces to that country, which is exactly what happened, of course, in the case of Iraq. So it's all about how do you end a very long war in a way that doesn't mean that a few years hence you have to go back in because the agreement by which we withdrew our forces turned out not to be sustainable when it came to achiev-

ing our objectives and our, our long-term goals in that particular engagement.

Vance Serchuk:

The only thing I would add to that is, look, I would very much like think as all of us, all Americans would like to see the end of these wars, but you know, we can only end these Wars when Al Qaeda and the Islamic state also decide that they are going to and these wars. And as of now, neither of those groups has any intention to do so. And so therefore, just as Dave said, when we end our involvement in these places, it's not as though the enemies that in fact drew us there in the first place are simply going to vanish. On the contrary, as we saw sadly in Iraq with the rise of the Islamic state after the United States withdrew. In our absence, the problem does not go away. On the contrary, it can metastasize and get worse and ultimately reach us here. So it's not a question of wanting to diminish our involvement, try to save costs wherever possible. Try to tailor our involvement in such a way that we can limit the blood and the treasure that we expend in these conflicts. Not least because those who point out that we have conflicting and competing priorities in the world right now, they're absolutely right, but a complete abdication, complete disengagement is not a recipe for ending anything. It's just a, on the contrary, I think a formula for making them dramatically worse.

Kimberly Kagan:

The United States negotiated and signed a deal with the Taliban at the end of February. You General Petraeus, you Vance Serchuck, argued that this is a bad deal in your article in Foreign Affairs. What's wrong with this deal?

Vance Serchuk:

Yeah, so the first thing I guess I would say about the agreement, which was signed on February 29th between the United States and the Taliban is it was motivated really by a noble impulse, which is precisely how does the United States extract itself? What has been a very long war, how can we also deliver uh peace to Afghanistan because it's the Afghan people themselves who have been suffering not just for the last two decades, but for for over 40 years since the Soviet invasion. And it's been an extraordinary period of of bloodshed and suffering. So the basic idea behind the agreement is can we reach some sort of understanding with the Taliban? Personally, I am all in favor of negotiating with enemies. I'm also in favor in this particular instance of trying to negotiate with the Taliban. The challenge with the deal, in my view, the fundamental problem with it is that in it we effectively have tried to make the Taliban into the principle guarantor of our counter terrorism interests in Afghanistan. So the deal at its essence is the straightforward trade off. We have agreed to withdraw all foreign forces from Afghanistan and in exchange, the Taliban has said that they will prevent groups that threaten the United States security or the security of our allies from operating in Afghanistan. Now, the challenge here is once the United States withdraws, how do we ensure that the Taliban live up to their side of the bargain for that matter as the United States reduces its presence, how do we verify? How do we ensure that the Taliban is living up to its side of the bargain. In third, the agreement itself is only limited to Afghan territory, it does not extend to Pakistan and unfortunately much of the interaction historically between the Taliban and Al Qaeda and other transnational extremist groups, it's obviously not just been in Afghanistan, it's been in Pakistan. The deal doesn't cover this. So I think that the basic concern that we tried to articulate in the piece that we wrote for Foreign Affairs is that there's a basic asymmetry in the deal. The United States after we leave and the deal requires us to completely depart within 14 months. Once we have done that, that is effectively irrevocable, it will be extraordinarily costly for the United States to reverse itself once we have fully withdrawn. The Taliban, on the other hand in the commitment that they have made on counter terrorism is much more ambiguous and much more reversible.

Kimberly Kagan:

You stated earlier that the enemies of the United States must end the war in order for the war in Afghanistan to end. Will the agreement that the United States has made with the Taliban guarantee that the transnational

terrorist groups will end the war?

Vance Serchuk:

Well, they're obviously not a party to the agreement. So the short answer to that is no. I think that the, the question there is is whether the Taliban ultimately upholds its side of the bargain and then what do we do if they don't? But related to that, Kim, and I think this is also a very important point, what the deal does not cover is of course the intra-Afghan conflict. So the Afghan government itself at the insistence of the Taliban was excluded from the negotiation. So they are not party to the deal. Rather the idea was that this would effectively be the the first stage of a process and that once the United States has made this commitment to the Taliban and vice versa with respect to our withdrawal over a fixed timetable in exchange for this Taliban commitment on counter terrorism, then an intra-Afghan dialogue would take place, bringing together the Taliban representatives of the internationally recognized Afghan government as well as other representatives of Afghan civil society.

Now here, here's the challenge with that, because the US Taliban agreement commits us on a hard deadline to completely leave Afghanistan, this intra Afghan dialogue, which was supposed to have begun last month and in fact has not taken place because the, the two sides are bogged down basically in a, in a dispute over a prisoner release which was supposed to proceed. The inter Afghan talks when this, and if this dialogue does take place, we have effectively forfeited any role for ourselves to try to pressure either side really towards towards compromise and particularly the Taliban. From the Taliban perspective, United States has said that we are leaving no matter what. If the intra Afghan dialogue stalls, if the intra Afghan dialogue breaks down, if the Taliban refuses to compromise, none of that has any impact on the U S commitment to leave and so therefore the incentive that we've created is really not towards an intra Afghan compromise. On the contrary, the message that we've sent is by virtue of the fact that we're going to be leaving no matter what next year, as long as the Taliban upholds its counter terrorism commitments, which, as we've said also raised some questions. It seems like the odds of an intra Afghan compromise and the Taliban in particular compromising with the Afghan government go dramatically down.

Gen. (Ret.) David Patraeus:

Kim, if I could just add here as well, keep in mind that another shortcoming in the deal is the reality that the Taliban don't really speak for all of the groups that are making life miserable in Afghanistan. As you know from your year there during the surge in Afghanistan, there are many other groups that are carrying out violent attacks against Afghan and coalition security forces and indeed the Afghan people and infrastructure. These include the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan of course Al Qaeda and the Islamic state and even the so-called Haqqani Taliban, the Haqqani network, which has an affiliation with the Afghan Taliban. Indeed the head of the Haqqani network is the deputy head of the surer that oversees the overall Taliban. But as you'll recall, we never assessed that the Haqqani network would take orders from the Taliban, if they say lay down your weapons we're going to have a ceasefire. And indeed this agreement is not a ceasefire in Afghanistan writ large or against Afghan security forces. It's just again a promise that they won't allow extremists on Afghan soil to carry out attacks against our Homeland. So that's also quite problematic. And of course there's even one other group, the Pakistani Taliban which carries out attacks on the Afghan side of the border as well that again add to the issues with this agreement that in our view and make it quite problematic.

Vance Serchuk:

You know Kim, just one other point and I think that one when you hear discussion about this agreement and you know the U S commitment to completely withdraw from Afghanistan along with with the other international forces, one response you sometimes hear is people will say, well look, even if we leave completely and the Taliban then goes back on its word and Al Qaeda or Islamic State or other transnational extremist groups take root in Afghanistan, that's okay because we can then pursue an offshore counter terrorism strategy after all, if we are able to

prosecute terrorist targets in places like Libya and Somalia and Yemen and we don't have to keep thousands and thousands of troops there, why is it then that it's necessary for the United States to stay in Afghanistan and logically that that argument makes sense on its face. The challenge I think then what we try to lay out a bit in our piece as well is why Afghanistan actually is different from those other places.

You know, it's difficult to do an offshore counter terrorism strategy when the country in question doesn't have a shoreline. Libya, Somalia, Yemen, these are all countries that have long coastlines and they also are relatively near to large US military facilities. So as a result we are able to project power into these places to prosecute terrorist targets. Afghanistan, by virtue of being in the heart of Asia, presents a very different and difficult set of logistical challenges. So there is no really good offshore option for Afghanistan now the United States could relocate itself from Afghanistan to a neighboring country, although many of the countries neighboring Afghanistan are not likely to be a particularly attractive for housing US military forces. I suspect neither Iran nor China nor Pakistan are particularly compelling or attractive. But even if you can find a neighboring country, all you effectively done in that case is relocated.

What is a large expensive US military footprint from one central Asian country to another and likely in less advantageous conditions for prosecuting the problem set. And so then you sort of have to ask yourself, okay, well what exactly have we just done and why did we do it? So you know, it's an understandable question that I think people ask very often when they see some of the other places that we've been able to keep terrorist threats in check without actually being physically on the ground. But Afghanistan presents these unique challenges, which is frankly, I think one of the reasons why it's probably an attractive place for the bad guys to have sheltered themselves over all these years. They know that it's remote and it's difficult for us to get there.

Kimberly Kagan:

General Petraeus, some say the war is hopeless because Afghanistan is remote, because the United States and its allies have already spent 20 years there, or because the government of Afghanistan has been difficult to work with. They've responded to what Vance is saying by arguing that the large troop presence has not and will not achieve US national security objectives. They would ask, why not pull out? How would you respond to their argument?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus:

Well, I'd say that it's not hopeless. Certainly it is the graveyard of empires and that description I think is well deserved and obviously having commanded at the height of our involvement there I have pretty good familiarity with the challenges of operations in the shadow of the Hindu Kush, but at the end of the day you'll recall that I set out the missions that sent us there and have kept us there, to eliminate the sanctuary that Al Qaeda have and used to plan, the 9/11 attacks and then to keep them from reestablishing that sanctuary, something that they have sought to do repeatedly and now the Islamic State does as well. And we've been able to do that over time with far less forces than we had there at the height of the war. During my time in command, in fact, we reached 150,000 coalition men and women in uniform, 100,000 of which were American.

We've now been able to reduce down and we're going to go to approximately 8,600 Americans, a few thousand additional coalition forces. That is a dramatic reduction. And that means there's also a dramatic reduction in the cost of course of maintaining those forces in the country. Meantime, it's the Afghan forces that have been doing the fighting on the front lines and taking significant casualties in doing that as we have sought to train them, equip, advise and assist, enable but not do the fighting on the front lines. And of course their institutions, however imperfect they may be, however fractious, have also been administering the country. So again, it's hard for me to accept an assertion that it is hopeless when we've been able to reduce so dramatically the cost of a sustained commitment and in my view is in fact that what we should see is a sustained sustainable commitment in which

sustainability is measured in terms of the expenditure of blood and treasure to accomplish missions that are still significant and still important to our national security interests.

Kimberly Kagan:

So what is it that 8,600 US troops can accomplish? Why do they need to be in Afghanistan? And what are the risks of pulling those forces out of Afghanistan either with the deal or without the deal with the problem?

Gen. (Ret.) David Patraeus:

Well, again, what they are doing is a mix of missions. They're continuing the so-called train and equip mission, which is the one that helps the Afghans recruit forces. We help oversee the training of those forces, the initial training and then the subsequent steps that are part of the professional military development of forces. We help them with equipment. We're certainly paying for certain of the costs that go along with this. We are advising and assisting but not out at the front lines but rather a couple of headquarters back, if you will. Certainly we are carrying out on occasion counter-terrorist force operations, whether with our precision operations by our counter-terrorist mission elements, often with our Afghan counterparts or in support of them. And then of course we are enabling their operations. It is our unmanned aerial vehicles. It's our fusion of intelligence on an industrial strength basis, something that we do uniquely well. It's our precision strike platforms from the air and so forth that are so helpful for the Afghan forces on the front lines when they get into a tough fight with the Taliban or indeed with the Haqqani network, the IMU, Al Qaeda, Islamic State, you name it, the other different groups that are making life difficult in Afghanistan.

If you pull out what it is that we're providing, there is a real fear that there could be a return to what we saw a couple of years after the Soviets left Afghanistan which was the gradual erosion on the central government and in particular when the Soviet stopped funding after two years for the Afghan government and its forces, there was a collapse of that government and essentially you had a civil war between various groups of warlords, different ethnic sectarian and regional groups and I fear that we would see the same again. That civil war did enormous damage to the cities of Afghanistan in particular to the Capital, to Kabul, and I fear that you could see the same kind of violence, once again, between the factions in Afghanistan that would all be fighting to seize part or all of the country for their control.

Vance Serchuk:

You know, what I would only add to that, Kim is, you know when you look back over the last 20-30 years, it's pretty clear what actually creates space for Islamist extremist groups to flourish and particularly the transnational groups that want to strike at us and, and our allies around the world. And that is when you see Muslim majority countries that that collapse into civil war. You know, it was out of the Afghan civil war in the 1990s that Al Qaeda got obviously its, its first major sanctuary. It was in the convulsions that took place in Iraq after 2003 that Al Qaeda in Iraq was able to establish a foothold initially before the surge and then, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, where you had multiple Arab countries that collapsed into civil war, Syria being the most violent and spectacular but also Libya, Yemen, that we, we saw these groups once again gain a foothold and then begin to use it to threaten the rest of the world.

The scenario of an Afghan civil war is so alarming, not just because of its humanitarian implications with refugees, with the suffering further suffering, of Afghan people, potential destabilization of Pakistan, but also because we know what the recipe is for groups like ISIS, like Al Qaeda to flourish. And it's precisely that. Now, where I, I agree with the instinct of the, the administration is that the only long-term guarantee against that is some sort of political settlement in Afghanistan. And that political settlement will have to include in some form the Taliban.

But, but here's another catch, right? There is a rich literature about ending civil wars. You know, since the end of the cold war, there have been dozens of civil wars and dozens of attempts to end those civil wars with political settlements, political agreements where different factions get brought together and then a deal gets broken. And so, well, you know, when a lot of foreign policy you have to kind of go on intuition and judgment. In the case of how civil wars end, there's actually an enormous amount of data. And one of the things which comes clear in this set of data when you review countries that have been convulsed by civil war as Afghanistan has is what makes a successful deal? What makes a fragile deal? What makes a deal that's likely to stick? What makes a deal that's likely to fall apart? One of the things, and when you think about it for a moment, and it actually, it sort of makes intuitive sense is when you actually get an agreement among the different factions that have been fighting and really they've been fighting for years and years, as in Afghanistan, you need to have peacekeepers. You need to have some sort of foreign force that does actually stick around. Why? Because of the prisoner's dilemma problem, right? After years and years of fighting of mistrust, unless you have some credible external party that is able to step in and serve as a guarantor, and again, the data here is pretty clear. It's preferably a great power. Then the odds that the deal is going to fall apart are very high. So when you think about, for instance, the Balkans where we had success in the 1990s in places like Bosnia which are all that they're troubled, the war ended. These were places where the United States together with our NATO allies went in and stuck around the paradox of this agreement with the Taliban is that precisely because it actually requires the US and all foreign forces to leave, even if there is an intra Afghan agreement that comes out of the subsequent negotiation which has not yet started, the odds that it will stick, are, in my view extremely low precisely because there will not be any external force playing that honest broker role. In a weird way, the US Taliban agreement sets the stage to make an enduring settlement for Afghanistan less likely and once again in the absence of that settlement and instead the side of civil war of the Dave described you go right back to the 9/11 problem.

Kimberly Kagan:

You have argued that trying to pursue a negotiation with the Taliban in an effort to wrap up loose ends in Afghanistan and withdraw all forces, is not actually going to advance the core national security interests that the United States has in Afghanistan. What should the United States be doing instead?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus:

Well, let me start and then I'll hand off to Vance on this one. In fact, we wrote in an earlier piece together that our view was that we should have a strategy for staying rather than a strategy for leaving. That is not to say that we should not negotiate with the Taliban, ideally with the Afghan government, legitimate government at the table, which has not been the case in this set of negotiations. But what it also gets at is again, you need this sustained commitment and by the way, the adversary doesn't really get serious about negotiation unless they are afraid that you will actually stay. If they think you want to leave, which I suspect is their assessment of us at this point, that's not the strongest bargaining position, needless to say, but that strategy for staying should be a sustainable one. And again, as I mentioned earlier, sustainability is measured in the expenditure of blood and treasure and if you can get that to a very modest number and I would contend certainly the number to which we're headed, 8,600 Americans, a few thousand coalition, pretty low casualties relative certainly to what we experienced at the height of the war and a fairly modest cost as well. Then again, it seems to me that that is very sustainable and is the kind of therefore sustained commitment that we would seek. Vance?

Vance Serchuk:

Oh, I, I fully agree with that, Dave. I, you know, I think a couple of points, I guess I just could elaborate on the, the, the first is to say, you know, Zalmay Khalilzad, who was the special Envoy and the chief negotiator for this agreement. Someone who we've both known for many years. He is an extraordinary talent and a brilliant negotiator and someone who has served the country, our country with really extraordinary distinction.

I think that in this case he was unfortunately dealt a weak hand and that we can, that Dave alluded to was the intention and the desire to completely leave Afghanistan. And if that is the, the sort of the point of departure for the negotiation, then I think you're in a way you've precooked the outcome in a way which is going to be an unfair, fundamentally unfavorable. To Dave's point, I think that the right concept has got to be a sustained and sustainable military commitment to Afghanistan, which is as light as possible while still upholding our interests and on the question of political sustainability, I guess I'm influenced here by my own experience during the height of the Iraq war during the surge Iraq. You know, that was a period of time when there was tremendous domestic political tumult around our involvement in Iraq and understandably so. You know, there were demands on Capitol Hill for the United States to exit Iraq and those demands reflected public opinion, which was seeds. Again, understandably by the issue there were antiwar protests and polling also reflected how incredibly unpopular our involvement in Iraq had become, at that point.

When you look at where we are in Afghanistan today politically, I think it's striking. We're, we're in a very different place. There is no broad-based political surge against our presence there. There are not votes in Congress to try to defund this. There are not large protests against our involvement in Afghanistan and when you look at the polling here today, I think what you see is that Americans are taking a very pragmatic approach towards this. Generally speaking, we'd prefer not to be in Afghanistan at the same time if leaving Afghanistan means that it's going to jeopardize our Homeland security, you see that certainly a plurality of Americans are prepared to have some sort of presence there for the long term. So the kind of urgency that I think understandably was there a decade ago or more around our involvement in some of these places just doesn't, doesn't apply right now. And when you talk to people, I think it's striking also on the campaign trail. It's 2020 we're going into an election. I would be, I'd be very surprised, given all of the things that are happening in the world if Afghanistan and you know, calls to get out of Afghanistan became a central point of of the the political discourse, unless it is injected by leaders at the highest level. When you look at town hall meetings that members of Congress go to, this is not the issue that people are showing up to talk about.

Kimberly Kagan:

General Petraeus, you have had the opportunity to see the threats that the Taliban, Al Qaeda and that other violent extremist organizations pose to the United States both inside of Afghanistan and in the case of the transnational actors actually globally. Should Americans still worry about a resurgence of transnational terrorist group capabilities?

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus:

Regrettably, I think the answer to that is yes. What we have seen in fact since 9/11 is that, as Vance mentioned earlier, wherever there are ungoverned or inadequately governed spaces in the Islamic world, Islamist extremists seek to take advantage. They seek to exploit these situations. We have seen this again in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Syria, in the horn of Africa, North Africa, Southern Philippines, a variety of other locations around the world and we have seen that inevitably we have to do something about this or what happens is you end up with a caliphate controlled by an extraordinarily barbaric and brutal extremist group, the Islamic State, which contributes to a condition where the tsunami of refugees from the country, one of the countries where they're fighting is so enormous that it really undermines the democratic foundations of our allies, in that case in Western Europe. It was the refugees really that led to the wave of populism, the ultra right wing nationalism and so forth that has been so damaging to politics in the countries of the Alliance in Europe. So you do generally have to do something about this and there is no question that extremists still want to carry out attacks on our Homeland, and if they can't do it directly, they seek to do it by inspiring others to do that. The reason that Anwar al-Awlaki, when he was in Yemen, was so dangerous, not just in Yemen and with the Al Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula, but in the United States, was because of the videos that he could make. He was a colloquial American English speaker addition to Arabic.

These, the videos that he made did more to radicalize Americans who ended up being, as we described, self radicalized, than any other person of which you're unaware, he was judged the most dangerous man in the world at the time of his death in September, I believe it was 2011 so yes, there still is that threat. Now to be sure, since 9/11 as these Wars have been prosecuted in Iraq and Afghanistan and Syria and other places, there had been other concerns that have arisen obviously in the so called resurgence of great power rivalries with the resurgence of Russian power and its activism and with Vladimir Putin and then the extraordinary rise, the admirable economic unprecedented rise of China, but also its rise to be a strategic competitor of the United States as well as our largest trading partner. And now we have come face to face with a threat, an enemy, that has actually just in a few weeks killed more Americans, than had lost their lives in Iraq, Afghanistan, the 9/11 attacks and the Gulf War together. And that is of course the Coronavirus pandemic. And that really deserves to be a national security threat, not just a health crisis. And what it has done to our country and to our economy obviously is vastly worse than any attack carried out by an extremist. And so you have to rightly add that at the top of the list of national security threats as we go forward.

Kimberly Kagan:

Can America do this? Can we, the United States do what we need to do in order to continue to protect the Homeland through engagement overseas and abroad?

Gen. (Ret.) David Patraeus:

Well, I'll start again and then hand off to my shipmate Vance, who you didn't note, by the way, is a US intelligence officer who actually deployed with special operations forces to the region. Now, can we do it? Absolutely we can. We're the United States for goodness sake. We can keep many, many plates spinning. If you think of the guy in the circus who puts a plate on a stick and gets it spinning, then goes over and gets another, comes back to the first one, keeps it spinning and we can put many plates and many sticks and keep them spinning. Some certainly are bigger and more important than others and we can't let those fall. So there has to be a prioritization and clearly there has to be a shift in focus to other threats beyond the threats, the enduring threat, the generational threat of Islamist extremists.

But absolutely we can do that. By the way, it's interesting to see how we have confronted the pandemic because it's a bit a story of of America that we sometimes are surprised. You have Pearl Harbor. You have a setback. We're not hitting on all cylinders as we come out of the Gates, if you will. And all of a sudden we get galvanized and you see entrepreneurship and innovativeness and public spirit and the national will all come together and now we're going to have ventilators made by car manufacturers and vaccines made by folks in Silicon Valley and the big pharma. Again, now we're really into this and I think we can do that not only with respect to the pandemic, not only with respect to Islamist extremists, not only when it comes to responding properly or not provocatively I might add, but firmly to this resurgence of great power rivalries, but to whatever other threats are out there as well. It just requires us galvanizing, making way together as we now are when it comes to confronting a pandemic. Then as I mentioned, this kill more than we lost in the longest Wars we've ever had. These endless wars plus 9/11 and the Gulf War. Vance?

Vance Serchuk:

Amen to all of that. Look, I think that the, the challenge that we have is that we have to find a kind of sense of, of balance and also realism. Balance speaks to the point that just as Dave said, we have multiple significant challenges and we have to prioritize, but we also can't abdicate or neglect any of them. One of the great fears that I have, and I think we've seen this now repeatedly, you know before 9/11 you know, the expectation in the Bush administration was that it was going to be focused primarily on the Western Pacific and dealing with the emerging challenges associated with the rise of China. The Obama administration came to office determined to try to extricate itself-

from the middle East so that it could rebalance or pivot towards the Asia Pacific, similar agenda, first 9/11 and then the rise of the Islamic State.

Precisely because these were such catastrophic developments, ended up consuming an enormous amount of bandwidth, and the Obama administration's experience here I think is particularly apt and relevant as a warning to the Trump administration. You know, I am someone who believes quite deeply and for long before it was a, was fashionable that there were going to be unique and significant challenges including military challenges associated with preserving a balance of power in Asia and that a lot of the, the, the optimism that was present 10, 15 years ago about the trajectory of the US-China relationship was regrettably something I didn't share. But my fear is that in the event that we in the name of trying to, to focus elsewhere, completely abdicate and capitulate in Afghanistan and there's then an explosion there. Nothing will be more harmful for our ability to be able to, to provide the kind of focus that we need to in the Asia Pacific then precisely that scenario.

So that's why my personal view is that I think we're much better off trying to preserve a sustained and sustainable presence in places like Afghanistan in order to keep these problems manageable. Now the other, when I speak of realism, you know, I think that as Americans we often would like to believe in the problems can simply be solved and tied up with a nice little bow and then we can go home. And you know, in a variety of different realms. I think sometimes we, and this isn't a criticism of one administration or another administration, I think that, you know, we, we've also sometimes had had leaders who haven't really been eager to, to tell the full ugly truth to the American people and partly because I think they themselves would like to believe that, you know, things like Afghanistan can simply be solved and then we can go home and we can move on to other thing. I think that when, what we are trying to say is we're delivering a message which is not one which we have much enthusiasm about because we would prefer likewise to just be able to say, let's, let's be able to to end this and leave. Instead the message is a much more cautious one and it's one tempered by again, a sense of realism, which is that for right now the best we can do is manage this problem and that is going to mean that we have to stay engaged and involved in it.

Now from a political standpoint, from a fiscal standpoint, from a military standpoint, can we do this? In my view, absolutely yes, we can, but we have to choose to do it. And that means setting aside some of the seductive illusions and delusions that we might otherwise be drawn towards.

Kimberly Kagan:

General Petraeus, Vance Serchuk, thank you so much for your time today, for your leadership on this particular issue. Your patriotic service to our nation and for your continued commitment to the United States, its leadership, and its values. It's been a great pleasure having you on this episode of Overwatch at the Institute for the Study of War. Thank you so much for your time.

Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus:

Thank you Kim, thank you.

Vance Serchuk:

Thank you Kim.

Kimberly Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

Contact us: For press inquiries, email press@understandingwar.org