



Defense Orientation Conference Association

POST CONFERENCE NOTES

Virtual Conference - Friday, October 30, 2020

Afghanistan Update and Its National Security Impacts

Post Conference Report

(All presentations were UNCLASSIFIED)

Due to a speaker cancellation intended to be live from Afghanistan, DOCA members instead began the conference by listening to a podcast entitled *Afghanistan - The Transition to the Trump Administration with General John (Mick) Nicholson and Ambassador Hugo Llorens (February 2019)*. This *Ambassador and The General: A Conversation* series podcast is produced and hosted by Ambassador Deborah McCarthy and the Academy of Diplomacy and supported by the Una Chapman Cox Foundation. The discussion between these two leaders included:

- Shaping the Trump Administration's Afghanistan policy
- The roles of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Iran in the region; and
- Prospects for peace negotiations

The podcast provided an excellent lead-in to the remaining panel discussions brought to DOCA members by expert speakers.

For more of the General and the Ambassador podcasts you can visit their streaming sites [here](#) or [here](#).

Ongoing Peace Talks, Long-Term Plans to Stabilize and Support Security, Commerce, Social Equality, and Economic Progress in the Country

A roundtable discussion began by highlighting how diplomacy fits in the toolbox of National Security, and touched on five different areas of diplomacy:

1. Reconnaissance
2. Communications
3. Negotiations
4. Foreign Assistance
5. Bases Overseas

We heard that diplomacy, as a tool for National Security, has been weakened by lower budgets and decreased number of personnel. These weaknesses make it difficult for USAID to surge in places like Iraq, Africa, and Afghanistan. U.S. diplomats still have a presence and mission in various countries, but they continue to cycle through these positions and move on to more prominent positions. Although understanding that future budget and personnel levels may not change, a balance and purposefully maintaining two areas as close overseas relationships can weaken over time. The first area mentioned was the area of information operations for the Department of State (DOS), for they have the capability of fighting misinformation. Second, cyber resources assist with diplomatic knowledge as they build new agreements.

Being a Fellow at Harvard University, witnessing the formulation of the next generation of minds to work in National Security, one panelist is helping pass the baton to future generations by bringing them together, no matter their focus, to educate them more about security issues, both domestic and internationally.



Another panelist shared their thoughts on the division among the American people but explained that despite the polarity, the general population understands the U.S. needs to be an active participant in the world. Whether global engagements are continued for reasons of trade or alliances, diplomacy remains critical to maintaining peace. Military involvement should be the last tool to be pulled from the National Security tool kit, making military intervention our last insurance policy when all other options have failed.

Both presenters started their careers during the Reagan administration. However, they witness some of the same problems today as they did in 1981, when the State Department/Foreign Service was the least funded in the U.S. government. It was stated that the State Department does provide a lot of “bang for the buck” for the American people, and so urged policy makers, from both sides of the aisle to recognize this and support accordingly.

Roles and responsibilities of ambassadors can vary. Interagency experience is one of the key elements of the State Department. Coordination of intelligence, by way of delegation and review, is another key role. One speaker highlighted the fact that an ambassador is the personal representative of the President of the United States in the country to which they are assigned, and that they learned that it is a critical responsibility to be transparent and open to your team and local staff to boost morale and manage human resources effectively.

Pillars of the National Security Strategy are a part of diplomatic negotiations. They wanted members to understand that **diplomats are negotiators** on all fronts. Country Teams are given goals to further U.S. interests. Having worked with both small and large teams, they were strengthened by their teams by expanding team capabilities when needed and helping them focus on mission objectives by cultivating individual talents. Another panelist agreed but expanded by relating their positions as Chief of Mission to conducting an orchestra. Additionally, leading by example in being disciplined and being willing to “get their hands dirty” can be a major part of supporting Country Teams.

Another participant on the panel talked about the importance of the Country Team’s marrying their expectations with those of the U.S. military leadership and applicable higher Headquarters. In order to strengthen these key relationships, effective communications coupled with unifying leadership brought around positive outcomes. One speaker’s philosophy is that when a dispute arises, leadership should have all of the accurate and available information. An example was presented about diplomats and the DoD being in sync on the ground. European countries, with the U.S. military presence, needed to make 30,000 soldiers look like 300,000 to the Russians. To accomplish this, missions were refocused to train the military in more traditional warfare instead of counter-insurgency operations. These processes only worked because everyone was “singing from the same sheet of music”.

Defining success as an ambassador can be challenging. However, each panelist shared stories. One success included seeing Greece, with assistance through the U.S. Treasury and negotiations with other European countries, avoid complete bankruptcy and decrease the risk of losing regional influence to the Turks. The U.S. helped facilitate resilience in the Baltic region by recruiting NATO partners, including Germany, to have a presence there. Also, Honduras is now able to hold elections following a coup that overthrew the standing government. Even if the wins are not globe altering, success can be measured by the strength of interagency relationships on all levels.

Pertaining to time in Afghanistan, they spoke about living in Kabul and the enormity of the country and its challenges. Adjusting to a new perspective there from the Trump administration, and knowing that the team had a modest role in influencing POTUS to create the South Asia policy despite overarching skepticism. That policy influenced Pakistan and brought the Taliban to the table to discuss peace options. One panelist remarked that “Everything in Afghanistan is hard. Everything in Afghanistan will continue to be hard,” when addressed about challenges about their role in reducing risks and costs. The presenter is not confident that military presence is the solution to the Afghanistan problems. Another panelist, too, said that the changes within the area will only happen on a local level, which is why focusing on building relationships with the village elders and provincial governors is key.

The U.S. also supported the country’s educational improvements. Upcoming Afghani generations are becoming more educated when they leave their country and receive degrees. Despite the opportunities that would be opened to the extremely talented graduates, most return to their home country to make good on what they were offered and to focus their talents in building their communities. The majority of the population in Afghanistan is under the age of 25, which leaves movements like advancing education or economic development a major part of Afghani self-sufficiency.



Concluding remarks from the panelists left DOCA members with thought provoking perspectives. Echoing each other, they implored that whatever changes occur in the 2020 presidential election, the administration needs to de-politicize what is happening in Afghanistan and work again to see the full scope of what the country means to National Security. Regarding overall investment, and one panelist believes that there should be a balance between funding for military efforts and the other two legs of National Security--Diplomacy & Development. None of the presenters felt that a full U.S. military withdrawal would benefit the stability of Afghanistan. They are all simply pulling for a strategic pause to occur.

The Current Status and Future of a U.S. Presence in Afghanistan and What it Means for the Country and Region from a Commerce Perspective

The second roundtable discussion included a presenter who was a retired Army officer who first served in Afghanistan as a Senior Logistics Officer, in charge of operation sustainment support. That work translated into a contractor career back in Afghanistan to support the U.S. and NATO troops there. Five logistic service strategic lessons learned were highlighted:

1. Plan for the long term, instead of one year at a time.
2. Enhance security, for lack thereof is a logistical impedance.
3. Leverage industry to the maximum extent possible, instead of using soldiers for the work.
4. Incentivize cost savings, instead of maintaining the status quo.
5. Leverage USAID and other elements of national power to drive local economies.

Another panelist was considered the subject matter expert on contracting for goods and services. Both speakers spent considerable time supporting businesses in parts of Central and Southwest Asia. After a considerable amount of writing about experiences throughout the region, they reiterated that there are numerous companies working in Afghanistan from the U.S. private sector. Private companies still struggle to develop business because of the lack of security in the country, as mentioned in "lessons learned".

Expanding on thoughts about incentivizing contractors to do good things in the Afghan region, the presenter said there is little driving the companies to decrease fuel use or energy storage. The big companies like Lockheed, Northrop, KBR, and General Dynamic, should want to do more, but without real incentives the changes won't be made...and without change, there will continue to be more stress on DoD budgets. In addition incentivizing contractors, establishing a consistent and longer tour length for contracting officers in the military would result in more experienced and dependable contracting officers that will help establish more contract for "highest/best value."

Supply chain challenges are common in Afghanistan since it is a land locked country supplied through the surrounding countries, some of which are also landlocked. The majority of trade and delivery is by truck and there are more than just security issues as they travel across a large and poor country. An improved efficiency and honesty at border/customs checks would improve supply chain demands. High priority items can take a minimum of 45 days to delivery, causing various additional logistical challenges. Afghanistan is one of the most logistically challenged countries in the world.

Security in the area continues to be fluid. While at Bagram Air Field when a suicide bomber detonated his bomb at the starting line of the Veteran's Day 5k in 2016 and that horrific moment impacted the entire base and all the contractor companies. Five Americans lost their lives and dozens were injured. The bomber was one of the panelist's employees for five years, but the team was not aware that he had been radicalized by the Taliban and had been slowly building a bomb within the small mosque that the U.S. had built for workers on the base. Immediately after the blast, the base was shut down. Afghans were no longer able to work on the base unless they had an escort at all times, and food for the base dining facilities was no longer allowed to be brought in locally. Everything was flown in, which slowed the food supply greatly.



The speakers felt that specific changes need to be made in order for the Afghan government and society to increase stability, encourage growth, and raise the overall standard of living there. Reducing public corruption is also important and provides a strong barrier to recruitment by the Taliban. The NATO generation, those that have been raised under Western operations, are expected to call for more action from their government. They echoed the comment from the first panel discussion about education for the Afghani population. They concluded that by positively addressing corruption, security, and education, there can be a better Afghanistan.

As it stands, just under 6,000 U.S. and NATO troops are in Afghanistan. One panelist agreed with the previous roundtable that there should be a strategic pause to re-evaluate the lessons that he and other leaders who have served in Afghanistan have had. He too, does not believe there should be a complete withdrawal. Another panelist believes the number of troops will be well above zero, and the force size may look something like what happened in Iraq. Though the number of soldiers will decrease, there is not an expectation that there will be a complete withdrawal.