**Beirut Institute Summit e-Policy Circle 39**

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**Unofficial transcript**

**Raghida Dergham:** Good afternoon Paris, where Lakhdar Brahimi, his Excellency, my dear friend, is coming in from, good afternoon Lakhdar Brahimi, and welcome.

**HE Lakhdar Brahimi:** Oh, thank you.

**Raghida Dergham:** Good afternoon Bucharest, where the Portuguese Bruno Maçães is now. Bruno how are you?

**HE Bruno Maçães:** Hello, very good, thank you.

**Raghida Dergham:** And then I have good afternoon Moscow, Dmitri Trenin is home, or around Moscow so hello Dmitri,

**Dmitri Trenin:** Hi Raghida, glad to be with you

**Raghida Dergham:** Nice to see you again. And good early evening to Tashkent, where US special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad is joining us, having been there on a very important meeting, but he very kindly made the time to join us, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it, my friend, your excellencies, Zalmay Khalilzad, it’s good to see you after all these years, we have known each other forever and you honor me by joining us.

**HE Zalmay Khalilzad:** great to be with you.

**Raghida Dergham:** Indeed, thank you. And this is e-Policy Circle number 39, of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi, honored to gather such distinguished minds, to discuss actually the consequences and impact of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on the world powers, on their relations and on the neighbors. Afghanistan is a very huge story these days, so we are going to try and fit in as much as possible, I shall start with giving the floor to Zalmay Khalilzad for four minutes exactly, and then each person will get four minutes, and then we will engage in a conversation. Thank you all for joining e-Policy Circle 39 of Beirut Institute Summit, Zalmay Khalilzad the floor is yours.

**HE Zalmay Khalilzad:** Well thank you very much, it’s a great honor and pleasure to be with you all.
With the withdrawal of the US and coalition forces from Afghanistan, we are going to enter a new chapter of relations with Afghanistan, and since I have four minutes I will say that this new chapter will be characterized in terms of US policy by four main features. One that **we will continue to support Afghanistan while the forces are leaving, the United States and our allies are not leaving Afghanistan, we will provide assistance to the security forces of Afghanistan, will provide economic assistance and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.**Second, we will focus in support of the peace process because we believe that there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict and that a settlement is necessary, and a settlement that has brought support in Afghanistan, and support from the neighbors, and the broader international community, of course especially the major powers. And we believe that such a settlement will have to have four features**. The political settlement must produce an inclusive government, a government that represents the diversity of Afghanistan, because without such diversity and inclusiveness, it will not work in Afghanistan and it will not have the necessary support from the neighboring countries.**

**A settlement must produce circumstances in which the rights of all Afghans are universally recognized and respected. Number three, that the Afghan people should have the right, at some point in the process, to have their say in terms of the leadership that governs them, through direct or indirect elections. Number four, that Afghanistan does not pose a threat to the security of the neighboring states, and beyond.** We have an agreement ourselves with the Taliban and with the Afghan government that the soil of Afghanistan will not be allowed to be used by groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and our allies, but indeed **what we want is a set of circumstances in which the security of no country, including the neighbors, should be threatened by terrorists based, or using Afghan soil.**  Number three is obviously preparations since there is a lack of trust and certainty at this point, whether the Afghan Republic or the Taliban would be able to deliver on that commitment, we are taking measures in commitment with others that will be able to monitor Afghanistan, and will be able to respond if the terrorist threat emerges. And number four, is that we will work with other major powers and the neighbors, to bring our collective leverage to encourage negotiations, and a settlement along the lines that I described. And in this regard, we have a number of initiatives that have been in place for some time, and one I will talk about and then finish, which is that we have a troika plus, a group that includes the United States, Russia, China plus Pakistan, that have been working together for over a year, and meeting in Moscow, Beijing, Doha, to encourage the parties, the Afghan parties, to come to a political settlement that meets the criteria that I have mentioned, and some of you may have seen those statements that we have made. We also have a US-Europe group, because Afghanistan will need assistance, and we will be prepared of course, along with other countries including our allies, to provide assistance to Afghanistan. **The Taliban look to being recognized, normalized, accepted, not to be a pariah state, to receive assistance, and therefore that too provides leverage**. We have asked the United Nations to play an important role in facilitating progress with regard to peace in Afghanistan, and the Secretary General has appointed a special representative, a personal representative of his own, Mr. Arnault, we’re looking to him to galvanize both the region and the broader community in support of this effort, and we’re looking forward to working with him, that concludes my presentation. Thank you very much.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much, Zalmay Khalilzad, looks like a rosy prospect where it is not necessarily so on the ground, we will discuss this once we hear four minutes from each of the other participants, I’ll go now to Sid Lakhdar Brahimi.

**HE Lakhdar Brahimi:** Thank you very much for inviting me Raghida, it is always a pleasure to be with such distinguished people, as co-panelists. I’ll address two points, one is the history that I know, the history of Afghanistan goes back thousands of years. **The history that I know, since the mid-1990s, is responsible for the situation that we have now. You know, it’s not 9/11 alone, but it is that everyone involved and connected to what went on in Afghanistan, including the United Nations, the United States, the neighbors and everyone.** So I’ll start with that, you know the Afghanistan is a far away country, land-locked, poor, you know some people would say backward. I will not use that word, never, about Afghanistan or any other country, but it is a country of people who are extremely proud, and they don’t like foreigners coming, they love foreigners to visit them, but they don’t like foreigners to come and occupy them. So not to go back again you know to the British and so on, they didn’t like the Soviet Union coming in, and fought them successfully to get rid of them, and they didn’t like the Americans coming in with their allies, including the United Nations. And well, amongst the mistakes that everyone has made, is that, you know, **everybody jumped to the conclusion that the Taliban were a creation of Pakistan, that they were created by Pakistan, very artificially, and that they didn’t belong. Even when they controlled 95% of the country, the international community, including the United Nations, refused to recognize that. That was a terrible mistake, you don’t like the Taliban, you don’t like their policy, but they control the country you should have paid a little more attention**. After 9/11, the Americans came to Afghanistan to punish the Taliban because they supported Bin Laden and company, who attacked them so savagely, as they did on 9/11. They were saying very very loudly, their Minister of Defense Mr. Rumsfeld, remember our campaign to elect Georges Bush the son, was that America does not do nation building. So you know, we are not going to help Afghanistan build a nation, but they did, they worked for that. The United Nations I think did not pay also attention, we all, you know after the invasion by the Americans, and after the United Nations started its operation there with UNAMA, we did not pay attention to one important factor, and that is, where are the Taliban? **The Taliban were defeated, they were routed, they left Kabul and the big cities, some were arrested, some were killed, but thousands and thousands of them had just disappeared. Where did they go, we didn’t ask that major question, and that was a huge mistake**, and I see that you are signaling me that my four minutes…

**Raghida Dergham:** Just finish that sentence, where did they go? Just finish that sentence, where did they go.

**HE Lakhdar Brahimi:** They went back to, some went to Pakistan, and some went to their village, probably shaved their beards, and, but they were still there, they were important and they were organized. And the result is what we see today.

**Raghida Dergham:** All right, I’m going to uh, really have a deep conversation about this, because I have many questions on the current situation of the Taliban, but first I’m going to go to Bruno Maçães, Bruno four minutes exactly please because we started late, and I want to have a conversation and engage with all of you, please, four minutes.

**HE Bruno Maçães:** Yes, well, thank you for the invitation, great pleasure to be on this panel. Of course, (it is) with some trepidation that I make comments about Afghanistan in the presence of Messrs. Khalilzad and Brahimi, who know so much more about the country and the process, I’ll make some comments about the impact for the great powers of what is happening in Afghanistan. **First Europe, people are concerned, in European capitals and in Brussels, mostly (about) the impact on migration, already in 2015 you remember migration from Afghanistan was an important part of the process and Europe is still very traumatized by what happened back then.** I think we are going to see again that happening, relations between Turkey and the European Union are already difficult, and of course a new wave of migration from Afghanistan could be the straw that breaks the camel’s back, both in the sense of the limited tolerance for a new wave of migration in Europe and relations between the EU and Turkey. We don’t know exactly what will happen, but we all remember very well that in 2015 the route from Kabul to Istanbul was an important part of mass migration that happened back then, I think this is the main consideration that people are entertaining now in Brussels and also European capitals. Second, the United States, now **I think that this is an unambiguous defeat for American foreign policy, for american power, for American prestige, we shouldn’t hide those words, there will be thoughts about how reliable American alliances are, once overnight because of domestic politics you drop an ally that was entirely reliant on you, and that in fact had tarnished its reputation by being so close to American power.** The Afghan government tarnished its reputation inside Afghanistan in my opinion, now, what went wrong**, I think the United States was just unable to deal with political reality in Afghanistan**, sometimes people tell me the goal was unrealizable, I actually don’t know what the goal was. President Biden said a week ago that the goal was not to create a democracy in Afghanistan, but then people are not sure anymore what the goal was. And I don’t think people in Washington know what the goal was, and when you go into another country for 20 years without having a clear idea of what the goal is, it’s not a surprise that it ends badly. It could end even worse as we move forward, I think the first two participants, as it is their duty and responsibility to be optimistic, I am not as optimistic, **there are serious concerns that the government could collapse, and there are serious concerns about the balance of power in Afghanistan**. Now we move to the third chapter, China. **I think China will be tempted by the idea of extending the influence and control it already has in Pakistan to Afghanistan, there are important mineral resources, and China is in a good position, because it has a privileged relationship with Pakistan, and has money to spend in Afghanistan, and it has money also to appeal to the coffers of the Taliban. So I think it is possible that we will see China together with Pakistan exerting power and influence over Afghanistan**, and perhaps being more successful, than the United States war, because the goals are more limited. We can talk about this when Russia went into Syria, there were many people including President Obama saying it was a quagmire, it wasn’t a quagmire, because Russia went into Syria with different goals from the goals that western democracies sometimes adopt. Very final point, **there is a possibility of a new balance of power if countries like UAE and Turkey are more present in Afghanistan, countries more closely aligned with Western views and Western interests, but this balance of power is not going to solve Afghanistan’s problems and we could in fact be led into a frozen conflict over time**. I’ll finish here, there will be time for discussion.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much, fairly enlightening. Dmitri I turn in to four minutes to you please?

**Dmitri Trenin:** Well thank you Raghida first of all for inviting me, I think that some people, **some people were jubilant at the fresh defeat of the United States or fresh failure of US foreign policy in Afghanistan. Others, more serious people, were thinking through the consequences of that defeat, and the consequences are quite serious. So I think that Russian thinking is guided by the following principle points. Point one, what happens in Afghanistan is the business of the Afghan people themselves. Russia will not be trying to interfere, or get involved in that. As long as what happens in Afghanistan does not cross the borders of Afghanistan, and create problems for Russia, and the countries of Central Asia. So basically the problem for Russia is not the Taliban, it is the jihadis, ISIS or such like groups that may cross the border into Central Asia, and seek to destabilize the countries in the area, and even get as far as Russia itself. And another big problem or the other big problem is drugs.** What would the future of Afghanistan mean for drugs trafficking, Russians point out that during the last 20 years, drugs trafficking from Afghanistan across Central Asia into Russia and across Russia to Europe has risen tenfold if not more. So Russia will be watching closely what happens, it will be coordinating, it is already coordinating with its allies within this loose grouping, this loose security arrangement called the collective security treaty organization that has Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as members, Russian has a military presence in Central Asia, very small, but not token, and if need be I think, they could do something to stop jihadis trying to infiltrate into Central Asia, and Russia will work very closely with all relevant players within Afghanistan, where the Kabul government, with the Taliban, with the various ethnic groups, and others, all who are relevant will be Russia’s partners as we have just seen during the visit by the Taliban group in Moscow. Most important I think Russia should hear, I don’t know whether this will happen or not, but **Russia should give so much more of a priority, to that part of the world, and work more closely with the countries in the area, with China, with Pakistan, with Iran, with India, Turkey and the Arabs.** I think I will stop here to save the time.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much Dmitri Trenin. I want to go to Zalmay Khalilzad and just ask you about a series of questions, quick questions. One, you have heard, well not everybody practically, speak of this departure of US troops as a sign of disloyalty, not staying the course, defeat, failure, first of all how do you respond to that?

**HE Zalmay Khalilzad:** Well I think that **our policy has evolved and adjusted to the circumstances, initially, we thought that Lakhdar said that the Afghans, that we defeated the Talibans and that the Talibans had disappeared, that there was perhaps a military solution. But over time, it had become clear that for reasons that is too little time to explain, that there was no military solution, and the Taliban had reconstituted, and the various attempts at the military solution to bring the Taliban to accept what would be acceptable to us and to the other Afghans through military means did not work. And therefore, why keep doing something that you judge is not going to work**. And the adjustment was a way to negotiate to see if the Taliban would meet our concerns. The fundamental reason that we went to Afghanistan was because of 9/11 and the Taliban agreed not to allow Al Qaeda or other groups that will threaten the United States, and therefore we came to an agreement with them and I believe that it’s too soon to judge the consequences of the decision that has been made, it is too soon to judge it was a failure, but I believe that maybe in a few years, in a decade, two decades a judgment could be made. I think a rush to judgement at this point is too soon.

**Raghida Dergham:** Quickly, do you believe that from a geopolitical point of view, do you feel that the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan is a gift to China like Bruno Maçães was suggesting in a way, and who is going to benefit now? Iran is said they are hosting the Taliban, they are trying to see that maybe they’ll run, you know they’re happy that the US is out.

**HE Zalmay Khalilzad:** I’m not so sure about that, that the Iranians are happy, or the Chinese are happy, because we were providing to some degree, free services to them, they were obviously concerned by the problems of terrorism, the Chinese have a concern about ETIM, the Iranians have concern about DAESH, and the United States and our allies were combating those terrorist groups in Afghanistan. And we share this concern with the Chinese, and the Iranians and the Russians, and the Central Asians, it’s sort of extraordinary the degree of consensus with regard to what we all seek. **I suspect that the Chinese will be very reticent to take on Afghanistan with all its issues, of course everybody would like to take advantage of the opportunities that are there, but I think I would not again rush that this is going to work, to the advantage of Iran, or to the advantage of China, there are challenges that, unless there is a political settlement, not only for Afghanistan but also for these countries that are closer, and I think Bruno Maçães mentioned some of them, that the Europeans are concerned, but I think the neighbors also be concerned about the refugees, about terrorism, so I think there is an opportunity here for cooperation, to mitigate the risks, but also use the influence that provide us the leverage with the two sides to encourage a political settlement.**

**Raghida Dergham:** Right, one more to you Zalmay Khalil before I go to the others, so, could Afghanistan actually be a normal state under a Taliban rule? Because as it looks right now, Taliban is taking over, there is chaos on the horizon, and as you correctly said maybe the problem of terrorism is not a US problem anymore and it should let others share the burden, I hear you say, but could Afghanistan be a normal state under a Taliban rule?

 **HE Zalmay Khalilzad**: I do not believe so, I do not believe so, I believe that given the Afghan circumstances and its needs, international needs, and its internal circumstances**, a monopoly of power by the Taliban will not stabilize Afghanistan, and would not be accepted as a normal player in the foreseeable future. I believe the Taliban can be a key player, and they can have their weight in the Afghan political future, but others, whether ethnically or otherwise, need to be accommodated**. The tragedy of Afghanistan of the last 40 years has been that when one group has sought to impose its will exclusively on others, it has led to resistance, and then because of the complexities of ethnicity, politics in Afghanistan and the regional rivalries, that has led to others intervening on the side of others. So the challenge of the Afghans is whether they will repeat the mistake of post-Soviet withdrawal, where rather than coming together, they went after each other, rather than agreeing to a formula broadly accepted, whether they would repeat that mistake, or whether we, and the Afghans have learned, we abandoned Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, whether we have also learned to work together, the neighbors and the internationals, and the Afghans, to come to an agreement on a political formula. Of course, given the recent history of Afghanistan, it is very easy to be pessimistic, and to say that the likely scenario is a protracted war, Afghans not coming together, region not cooperating, and therefore chaos and terror, yes that’s easy to project that given the recent history, but, I think there is an alternative future, and that’s a future that I believe we all should come together in support of.

**Raghida Dergham:** Do you think it is reasonable to believe that there might be a national government with Taliban? Between Taliban and the current people in power? Maybe it seems to be too, realistic. Maybe it seems that it is too far-fetched. Is it not a realistic idea today? What do you see realistically?

**HE Lakhdar Brahimi:** I don’t know. You know the short answer is that I don’t know. But if I may, I will start by a very perceptive remark made by Bruno Maçães, about the opportunity of China working with Pakistan, to actually take the opportunity of the American and Western withdrawal, to be the master of the game in Afghanistan. That would be, in my humble opinion, a terrible mistake, that the Chinese would make. They would be doing what the Soviet Union has done, what the Americans have done, ignoring the fact that Afghanistan want to be masters of their own house. They don’t want Pakistan to govern them, they don’t want China to govern them, nor China and Pakistan together. I think that, you know, from what has been said, and also from the little experience we had, **peace and war in Afghanistan depends very very largely on their neighbors. I will name three in particular, Iran, Pakistan and India. These three countries need to agree, at long last, that peace in Afghanistan is in their interest.**

**Raghida Dergham:** And how likely is that, Lakhdar Brahimi?

**HE Lakhdar Brahimi**: It is very likely, if three other countries raise their voice and tell these three countries, this is what is needed. And those three countries are **Russia, China and the United States. These three countries have got to agree themselves that peace is in their interest, it’s in the interest of the rest of the world, and they have got to go to these three neighbors, three capital neighbors of Afghanistan, and tell them, you have got to work for peace, not for war. If one of them, you know this is terribly important, in my humble opinion, if one of these countries, one of India, Pakistan and Iran, one of them thinks that war is in their interest, the other two will have to say that yes, war is our interest. And then war will continue forever in Afghanistan. But if they agree, or are helped to agree, then there is a possibility to make peace in Afghanistan.**

**Raghida Dergham:** One quick one with you Lakhdar Brahimi, and I would like Zalmay’s comment on this before I go to both Bruno and Dmitri. Look, is there any writing on the wall that there will be any possibility of an agreement between India and Pakistan on the issue of Afghanistan? Or on Iran not finding this in its interest, quick answer by Lakhdar Brahimi and Zalmay Khalilzad, and then I want an answer from Dmitri.

**HE Lakhdar Brahimi:** Yes. You know they have been living with a neighbor at war, what did it bring to them? India spent more money in Afghanistan than they have spent anywhere else in the world. What did it bring to them? This is what they should think. And I think if the other three encourage them, together, perhaps starting with this group that they have formed, the group of three plus, maybe we will get there.

**Raghida Dergham:** Zalmay, give me one description Zalmay Khalilzad, in a word or two describing the role of each of these three countries in Afghanistan. Let’s start with Iran?

**HE Zalmay Khalilzad:** Lakhdar is overall right that those three countries, or neighboring countries are very important. He’s also right that the role that neighbors play, will be vital in affecting Afghanistan’s trajectory, and he is right that the Afghans, although they are vulnerable to influence by these countries, ideally they would like to be the masters of their own destiny. I believe that all three have a common interest in Daesh not gaining influence in Afghanistan. All three would like to see stability at one level in Afghanistan, because, let me take the example of Pakistan. With stability in Afghanistan, where I am in Central Asia in Tashkent, the markets of Central Asia would be open more efficiently to Pakistan, and Pakistan could be the beneficiary of trade, connectivity, development, cooperation with Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. And for these countries, they will find a quicker way to export their products to the world through Pakistani ports. So there are positive things that could be achieved, but from the negative you get nothing but refugees, you get narcotics, I think you already mentioned the whole range of threats that a conflict in Afghanistan would pose, that should not be in the interest of any of these countries.

**Raghida Dergham:** Yes, I understand that, I understand. That’s not my question. My question is the current position of each of these three countries, give me a description of each. Iran? And then I’ll ask you India and Pakistan. As is now.

**HE Zalmay Khalilzad:** No of course, none of them will say what the situation right now is the conflict intensifying, with the Taliban making significant gains, is to their interest, but whether they have a common vision of a political settlement, or not, I think the Iranians will emphasize a political settlement that is very inclusive, that as the groups, the ethnic groups with ties to Iran, the Shia, the Tajiks and the Hazaras should be represented in a political process in a future government. But at the same time, they would not want Daesh in return to have a significant role. Each of them have reasons for what kind of an outcome would work for them, the issue of elections for example, a process that also respects the right of all Afghans, the Indians would also be more supportive of that. So there are things that in the formula that I described, the four elements, that we believe at least, reflects the realities of interests and concerns that are the result of direct or indirect discussions with these neighbors we believe can, not that it will, but can, it’s an opportunity, an option, that we can use that influence to make progress.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much. Dmitri Trenin, Russia, US, China, and you’re worried in particular from the security angle, Russia is very worried about the rise of Islamic extremists, the threat to neighboring countries and to Central Asia, to your own country in Russia, what is it that worries you most at this point? Is it Taliban, is it Daesh, is it China’s no I’m not trying to say this, is it the US pullout, and will you be coordinating with China in Afghanistan?

**Dmitri Trenin:** No, I think Raghida that, **what worries the people in Moscow is not so much the Taliban. The Taliban is a mixed bag, but the consensus in Russia, in Moscow I should say, the Taliban are essentially about Afghanistan. It’s a group that fights for supremacy or primacy in Afghanistan. And as such it doesn’t threaten the Russian interest. Russia doesn’t care these days who rule Afghanistan. What it cares about is Daesh, clearly, if they build their strongholds as they are building their strongholds already within Afghanistan, if from those strongholds, they start probing the stability of the still fragile countries to the north of the Afghan border, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, that would be a big problem for Russia. And clearly drugs, those are the three problems. Whether China or somebody else will dominate Afghanistan is not Russia’s concern, it’s not a big concern, and I don’t think they expect China to dominate Afghanistan, but that would not be a concern.** The United States is leaving the region to regroup. Frankly, globally, it has other priorities these days, from 20 years ago, but you know, there are two problems that the Americans create, one is when they descend on a region and disrupt the geopolitics there as the American did in 2001. And the other problem is when they pull out, and leave a mess for others to sort out. So Russia is caring about sorting out the mess or the consequences of that pullout. They would have preferred the United States to stay there for a long time. But that’s not Russia’s choice, that’s not Russia’s decision clearly.

**Raghida Dergham:** And so, let me push you a little bit on the priorities of Russia, in Afghanistan. In a way, you wanted the US to stay and fight it out, fight the extremists, and you’re saying we’re not getting in now, you know, don’t drag us back in, because I suppose you have the history, a very bitter history in Afghanistan. So why should the US have stayed in to do the work that you Russia and the neighbors should be doing, you know like President Biden is saying, you know it’s endless wars, and it’s not our business anymore. It’s that, what’s wrong with that concept.

**Dmitri Trenin:** Well there’s nothing, Raghida there’s nothing wrong with that, that was a sovereign decision by the United States, that was a decision maybe taken a bit too late, because for a long time, after the defeat of the Taliban, the initial defeat of the Taliban, the destruction of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, there were no serious, vital goals for the United States to pursue, because fighting the Taliban I think was a very wrong objective for US foreign policy. The Taliban did not, and would not threaten the United States by themselves. So no, Russia**, the decision by President Biden didn’t come as a surprise, what would have come as surprise is a decision to stay on, because I think that after Trump’s decision to pull out, people were expecting the United States to do just that, because there was nothing for the United States left to pursue in Afghanistan.**

**Raghida Dergham:** So why all this criticism by the…

**Dmitri Trenin:** There is no criticism, there is no criticism, there are two things, **there is jubilation over American defeat, which you would understand, on the condition of confrontation that exists, but this is superficial, this is the foam on the surface of the water, the real thing is the concern about what to do, now the Americans are already almost gone, so it’s up to us, the mess is for us to sort out, but we’re not going into the heart of the nest, we’re only looking at the perimeter, or the part of the perimeter that looks to Russia.**

**Raghida Dergham:** So if there is, Bruno Maçães, if there is what some people are warning of, the global bloodletting after the American withdrawal of Afghanistan, it is being called a fiasco, you spoke of, it could end even worse, if that is the scenario, who is going to be paying the biggest price other than the Afghani people?

**Bruno Maçães:** Well, certainly the Afghani people, I see a scenario I think is possible, **so many people are worried about a scenario where the Taliban will become dominant, and then we’ll be receiving all these regular troubling news about developments in the Islamic emirate, but I think there is another scenario, a Syrian scenario, where Afghanistan remains under the influence of several foreign powers and they all seem to be rushing in.** **We just got news, I don’t know if they’re confirmed or not, that UAE is interested in providing air support for the Afghan army, I would see that they would be tempted by this, but this is a pattern we’ve seen in Syria. Certainly India, at the very first news of activities organized in Afghanistan against Indian national security, and we know how febrile Indian public opinion is on these matters, there would be demand for action. China to go back to my initial remarks, China doesn’t want to take over Afghanistan, but it would certainly be interested in taking over certain economic activities that will be heavily fortified and protected, the rest of Afghanistan would be left to its luck and many other powers would be tempted to go in. We would see a scramble for Afghanistan in the next few years, so I think that is a more likely scenario that a scenario where the Taliban will rule without any opposition, and I think that’s unlikely, but it’s a troubling scenario, and certainly from the point of view of my own continent, there would be an impact, but there would be an impact everywhere**, in India, and there would be an impact in Iran as well, I think China will probably deal better with it than Russia, would probably deal better.

**Raghida Dergham:** And Bruno Maçães, how do you see the potential relationship between Taliban and the rise of the Islamic State or Islamic extremists, Daesh or others, what do you expect would happen, if Taliban is in better control of Afghanistan, would they fight each other out, how would you read that?

**Bruno Maçães:** Yes, **it’s back to the idea whether the Taliban can create a strong state in Afghanistan, I don’t think they have that ability. I think they will have different forces, parts of the country they will have trouble controlling, and that means in practice, that there will be many strongholds, as Dmitri said, for other forces, and some I think, directly opposed to American interests.** So I’m slightly puzzled by this idea that America has reached its goal because there is no one left in Afghanistan that directly opposes American interest. I think many of these groups will proliferate, simply because the Taliban will not be able to do anything about it. Final point, I think Mr Khalilzad said very well that perhaps one argument that has to be emphasized is the idea that if different Afghan groups and interests want to keep foreigners out, then they have to come together, I think that’s a powerful argument and it’s worth using during the negotiations, even though I remain pessimistic.

**Raghida Dergham:** Zalmay Khalilzad, 20 years later, 2 trillion dollars later, the US, you know you are the Special Envoy and you are appointed not only for the withdrawal of the US troops of Afghanistan, but for the purpose of reconciliation, working with the neighbors, what do you say to people who are telling you, and they are Americans who are as nationalistic as many in the Biden administration so that you heard it from people that I know you respect, that they’re warning about the consequences, they’re saying that there is going to be a bloody chapter thereafter, that it is the wrong way of pulling out, that it is not done in the thoughtful way. Will there be a reconsideration of the timetable of pulling out, from your point of view, if this situation on the ground is getting worse? That’s number one, and do you think it’s going to be bloodier chapter.

**HE Zalmay Khalilzad:** Well, for those friends who argue, if you have reflected their concerns correctly, the fact is that Afghanistan has been at war for 43 years. It isn’t that Afghanistan has been peaceful, and now, we are withdrawing, and therefore it’s becoming a battleground. The Taliban were making progress each year of the last several years, while we were still there, and there couldn’t have been any prospects for any agreement, we tried that between the Taliban and the government for the last 20 years. The Taliban said they would sit across the table from the government if there was an agreement, if there was an agreement between the United States and the Taliban on withdrawal, and now **for the first time in 43 years, if I’m correct, that the fighting parties in Afghanistan are talking to each other.** When the Soviets withdrew, there was no real international process for negotiations between the government, there was some, but not serious before the withdrawal started, about the future. And therefore, what we have tried to do is to, with the withdrawal, to have a process into Afghan negotiations. And second, I think I disagree with colleagues who have said, for example, that the Americans are abandoning the region, or Afghanistan. No, we’re adjusting our posture, we’re developing stronger relations with Central Asia, we are maintaining relations with Pakistan, we are working with others in terms of support for a peace process that I mentioned, so yes, I am myself having been in Afghanistan and with Lakhdar right after the 9/11 and after the US forces and coalition forces came, we wish that process had ended the problem in Afghanistan, but it didn’t, so the time had come to adjust, that’s one reason, and obviously the world has changed over the last 20 years and the US priorities have had to adjust as well as was said by Dmitri. So therefore yes, some are disappointed, some are unhappy, but it wasn’t that the alternative, that there was a realistic alternative that, if we continued what we are doing for another 10 years, the problem would have been less, we would have been able to promise success, victory, now I think this withdrawal gives the opportunity to see if the Afghans can work out, a formula, the Talibans had said that with the withdrawal they would sit at the table and negotiate and that’s what’s happening now.

**Raghida Dergham:** Zalmay Khalilzad, Lakhdar Brahimi wants to come in, but when I come back to you, I’ll come back to you for your conclusion and your concluding remarks, but keep in mind that I want to ask you about, I want to address this issue that there is fear that, not only in Afghanistan, there will be a rise or resurgence of Daesh and Al Qaeda and etcetera or whatever type, and not only within Afghanistan, but maybe all the way in the Horn of Africa, Libya, Iraq, etcetera, so keep that in mind when I give you your one minute conclusion, I’ll come back to you at the very end. Lakhdar Brahimi, conclude please, make your comment and give me your conclusion as well, so that I could end up in time please.

**HE Lakhdar Brahimi:** What I would like to say is that there is no good time for the Americans having stayed all this time, **there was no good time to withdraw, any time they decided to withdraw is a bad time, and the thing now is to make the best of what, you know, the hell that the Afghan people have been through.** This is terribly important to remember. So let’s not discuss, you know, whether the time that has been chosen is right or not, it has been chosen, the Americans are withdrawing, as a matter of fact they practically withdrew. What do we do now? I think we need to look back to the recent history or perhaps to even, further back, and learn lessons. You see Bruno Maçães is completely right. We have, we have to expect the worst. And the worst could happen. But aren’t the neighbors interested in avoiding that worst? I mean, speaking of Syria, what happened in Syria was that nobody was interested in what happens to the Syrian people. People were fighting their private wars, that’s all they were doing. So if people go now, and once again, fight their private wars, yes definitely we will have what Bruno Maçães has said we will have. Chaos, that will be extremely horrible for the people of Afghanistan. But, it will also affect very badly the neighbors and further, who ever thought that, from Afghanistan, the United States will be attacked, as it has never been, on the 11th of September 2001. One last point we haven’t spoken of this until now, we have got to pay tribute to the State of Qatar, who have been very patient, have had the vision to say that peace is possible in Afghanistan, and have been working for this all these years, so we pay a tribute to them.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much Lakhdar Brahimi, I need to give Bruno Maçães, I’ll give you one minute and a half max Bruno Maçães, and then Dmitri Trenin, and then Zalmay Khalilzad. I have to conclude in four minutes exactly, one and a half minutes each. Please Bruno.

**Bruno Maçães:** Maybe I don’t even need a minute and a half, I think Mr. Brahimi’s words are very wise, in the end there was not a good moment for the US to withdraw, you know I keep thinking, there was an agreement signed with the Taliban last year, and it said that the US would withdraw if the Taliban honored its commitments, I don’t think they have honored their commitments, but what can the US do at this point, it’s probably too late, it’s certainly too late to change the strategy, and it’s probably too late to have an exit that would not lead to a higher level of chaos. The only thing, obviously that we all hope, is that the US will remain engaged with a reason, and there is still a lot that the US can do, even after the withdrawal, both militarily I believe, and economically, and if there is a change of perspective in the Biden administration then it should also contemplate those areas, investing in infrastructure, and in human resources, and continuing to do that even after the withdrawal.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much Bruno Maçães, I’m going to go to Dmitri Trenin, a minute and a half to you please.

**Dmitri Trenin:** Yes, thank you Raghida, first of all I think we need to be humble, I think we need to accept that Afghanistan will be made or unmade by the Afghans themselves, I think those of us who face direct consequences need to deal with those consequences themselves, and in cooperation with the others in the region and beyond, and if invited, outside powers could join, if invited by the Afghans. They could join in attempts to facilitate inter-Afghan dialogue, and potentially some sort of political arrangement. That’s all.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much Dmitri Trenin, again one minute to you Zalmay Khalilzad, before we lose electricity and get embarrassed again.

**HE Zalmay Khalilzad:** Thank you, no I agree with what Dmitri said on the need for a political settlement, and cooperation among the regional players and others in support of that on terrorism, I think one of the factors that are mentioned repeatedly that ISIS has grown, I believe that ISIS has lost territory in Afghanistan in the last few years, it remains a threat, but mostly in urban areas. And one of the reasons that is has lost ground is that the Taliban going after ISIS, and they have a commitment to work, to make sure that against ISIS, and that it doesn’t become a physical presence that can threaten others from Afghanistan. But the terrorism issue will remain, and in cooperation with others, we will monitor, and will be able to cooperate and respond, there will be some loss in our capabilities no doubt, but we are committed to reorganizing our forces regionally, and in cooperation with others to be able to do monitoring, and to respond if a response is needed.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you so very much, it’s always such an honor and a privilege to engage with friends, brilliant as you all are, and thank you for accommodating my push as always I always push the envelope with you all, Zalmay Khalilzad thanks for making the time from Tashkent, because I know you’re in the middle of a lot of important works, I wish you best of luck. Lakhdar Brahimi, it’s always great to see you, and I failed to mention that you are a member of the board of Beirut Institute, we are very proud of that. Dmitri Trenin, please continue to be my guest, because you bring in fabulous dimension to the conversation as always. Bruno Maçães, it’s great to see you for the first time, let’s all hope we meet in Abu Dhabi in March, God willing, for the fourth edition of Beirut Institute Summit, with that I bid you a good day, good evening, good afternoon and next week, or the Wednesday after next, on the 28th of July, will be the last e-policy circle of the Spring-Summer season for these e-policy circles, so it’s going to be great, join me on the 28th and then, then take a break, but what an honor, thank you very much, I appreciate it my friends, thank you. Goodbye for now.