

Center for American Progress



SPECIAL PRESENTATION

**“U.S. POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN: A
CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS CONVERSATION
WITH AMBASSADOR RICHARD HOLBROOKE AND HIS
INTERAGENCY TEAM”**

MODERATED BY:

**JOHN PODESTA, PRESIDENT AND CEO, CENTER FOR
AMERICAN PROGRESS**

FEATURED SPEAKER:

**AMBASSADOR RICHARD HOLBROOKE, THE SPECIAL
REPRESENTATIVE FOR AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN**

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MR. JOHN PODESTA: Good morning everyone. Good morning everybody. I'm John Podesta. I'm the president of the Center for American Progress. Thank you for joining us this morning. The Center's honored to have Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and his really spectacular team here today – who you see in front of you – and we have more members in the front row. This region of the world is a primary national security concern for the United States, one that was reaffirmed by the president back in March when he made the case for a stronger, smarter, more comprehensive commitment to the conflict there.

The Center has also made this a primary focus through the ongoing work of CAP fellows and senior policy analysts, particularly Larry Korb, Brian Katulis, who will be – he's here this morning - he will be headed to Kabul this evening on election monitoring mission Caroline Wadhams and Reuben Brigety amongst others. Ambassador Holbrooke has assembled an impressive team on stage here, but an important point to note, which should be evident as you read through their biographies is the multidisciplinary, interagency nature of Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Holbrooke's approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan, which hinges on the close integration of the United States diplomatic, developmental, legal, and military assets. To the best of my knowledge, this is a first – drawing all these resources together under one roof and one umbrella, so to speak. And I'm sure that Dick will discuss the why as well as the how of taking this approach.

The need for coordinated approach to national security issues is the cornerstone of the Center for American Progress' sustainable security project, along with our broader recommendations on national security policies for many parts of the world. Whether it's labeled smart power, integrated power, or sustainable security, we're all watching the AfPak team intently as a test case for a new approach for taking on our toughest security problems.

The ambassador's team faces a multitude of interlocking challenges. In less than a week, Afghans will vote in the presidential and provincial council elections for the second time since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. While record voter registration numbers are a hopeful sign, concerns about pervasive corruption, pre-election violence – particularly from the Taliban – reports of electoral fraud, and continued disconnect between the needs of the Afghan people and the ability of inclination of their government to provide for them threaten to overshadow this moment.

Beyond the election, sharp increases in the use of roadside bombs and growing insurgent presence in multiple parts of the country made July the deadliest month for international coalition forces since 2001. There is increasing concern here at home and in allied capitals abroad about the cost of winning in Afghanistan, and to what end goals we should aspire.

In neighboring Pakistan, the government continues to grapple with growing internal instability and a strengthening insurgency, an economic crisis, and ongoing refugee crisis in the Swat Valley region, persistent challenges in bringing the justice system to bear on terrorists who target Pakistan and its neighbors, and the ongoing transition to effective, representative civilian role.

In short, the situation is complex enough to challenge even this truly exceptional group we've assembled on stage and in the front row here today. Perhaps, given his multitude of experiences, as one of the nation's most distinguished diplomats, from Vietnam, to East Asia, to Bosnia and Kosovo, to the United Nations, no one is more capable than my friend Dick Holbrooke to lead this team. After Ambassador Holbrooke gives a few brief introductory remarks, he's going to introduce his team and the people on stage who have a few minutes worth of comments. We'll then shift to a discussion format where we can begin to address some of the largest strategic questions surrounding our policies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. Particularly, I hope to focus on the implications of the upcoming election in Afghanistan for our efforts there, our objectives in Afghanistan and how we measure progress, the challenge of rebalancing our instruments of national power to more fully address the political and economic aspects of our relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan, and most critically perhaps, placing the threats in both countries in the context of our broader national security priorities.

Thank you all for coming today. I look forward to productive conversation. With that, let me turn it over to Ambassador Dick Holbrooke.

AMBASSADOR RICHARD HOLBROOKE: Thank you, John, and thank the Center for American Progress for offering this opportunity today to talk to you. When we first talked about an event, I suggested that rather than another speech by me that we bring the entire team. We actually don't have the entire team here. Several people are missing and I'll mention them in a minute, but I've been privileged to work with a lot of terrific people in my career in the government, including some people in this room, who I recognize, but I think this is the best team I've ever been able to work with and I'm so pleased they're here today.

We want to focus today on the civilian effort. You can ask any questions you want, but we are here as the civilian side of an integrated civilian military operation.

The background is simple, and I'll be brief, because we want to get to substance and to my colleagues. When the president-elect and Hillary Clinton offered me this job, they stated that they wanted to have a counterpart on the civilian side to the commander of CENTCOM, General Petraeus, to integrate the civilian effort. Hillary, who has been absolutely instrumental in this process – just a footnote – legally, technically, we are attached to the Office of the Secretary of State, and she personally approves every member of this team, and she knows everybody on this podium personally. So it's not the great anonymous bureaucracy. She has – she's approved everyone. She agreed immediately and encouraged us to reach out to other agencies. And what you see here

are some of the nine agencies represented on our team. The ones that are missing today, just to clarify things, are the – my senior military adviser, General Field, is out on personal leave. Our CIA representative told me that he can't be surfaced, so he's not here. Our Department of Homeland Security representative is not yet in place, so he or she is not here yet, but we're working very closely with Rand Beers because homeland security has a vital role in all this. And the FBI representative, Chris Reimann, is in town, but he's on another urgent assignment. So this is not our full team.

The mandate was clear, and now I want to introduce the team. And then for those of you who want to discuss the elections and didn't stay up late enough last night to see the definitive discussion on Stephen Colbert, we'll discuss that. And if you didn't see it, go to YouTube, because he got it pretty accurately. And then, to make sure you got the point, he interviewed James Carville, who is advising Ashraf Ghani. And so that's a good set up for us.

Now, I'm going to introduce the people one by one, and very briefly. And we're going to start off with Barnett Rubin, who is an NYU professor, now on detail to our team; in my view, the leading American expert on Afghanistan for the last 30 years. I think all of you know who he is. It's a tremendous asset to the United States government to have him on the inside telling us why everything we do is wrong instead of on the outside telling us why everything we do is wrong. But today he's going to give you a quick overview. And each person will talk for two minutes. We'll move fast, and then we'll get to Q&A, and I'll do the cleanup. Barney?

MR. BARNETT RUBIN: Thank you very much, Richard. Is this on? Yes. Thank you. Everyone here of course knows that we're engaged in a very difficult war in Afghanistan, and that we are in the midst of presidential and provincial council elections under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and you'll hear more about those elections later on. What I'm going to do is talk a little – very briefly, about what we might call setting the conditions for success in Afghanistan, which I know is something that is on the minds of the American people, the point when we will no longer be so engaged in combat as we are – and as we must be – right now.

There are two basic elements of that. One is enabling the Afghan government basically to control and govern its territory, and the second is supporting and creating a regional and international environment where the neighbors and great powers have a stake in the stability of Afghanistan, rather than feeling a sense of threat from it and reacting to it by destabilizing it.

On the side of civilian governance, of course, we are continuing efforts to build national governance. The election is part of that, as are other assistance programs, but we have an important focus on sub national governance in cooperation with Afghan government and other donors. And rather than just putting money into building the government, we are focusing with rebuilding on – with the Afghan government on rebuilding the relationship between the sub national authorities and local communities.

Our security strategy is aimed at creating a local security environment that is supportive of competent officials rebuilding relations with those communities, and also of revitalizing those communities, both through the agricultural strategy that you will hear of later and through other community development programs. In order to do that, we have to eliminate or diminish some of the obstacles at the local level, including the presence of a variety of armed groups that have grown up in the course of this war and the wars that preceded it over the last 30 years, and in diminishing the weight of the illicit economy, including the drug trade.

To that end, to make those efforts supportive of our government efforts, we have changed our counternarcotics policy so that we are phasing out crop eradication and focusing on assisting rather than threatening the communities there, while we focus most of our sanctions effort in counternarcotics on traffickers higher in the value train, and particular on those most closely linked to the Taliban.

Finally, in the region – it's clear Afghanistan cannot be stable if its neighbors don't want it to be stable. Therefore, we have a wide ranging diplomatic effort, including a network of special representatives who are Ambassador Holbrooke's counterparts. We have a policy not only toward Pakistan, Afghanistan's most important neighbor in terms of its influence in the country, but also toward the relationship between those two countries, and are also engaged in regular consultations with all the major powers who have a stake in that country in order to transform the declaratory consensus that now exists into a truly substantive one.

MR. HOLBROOKE: Thank you, Barney. A footnote – Barney mentioned my counterparts. This is a good example of the way I think the United States should lead. When President Obama and Secretary Clinton offered me this job, there were no counterparts. By – within four months, there were 25, some of which are countries you wouldn't expect but wanted to show their involvement, like the Danes, and the Swedes, and the Spanish. But three I particularly want to draw your attention to: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates have all appointed counterparts. Turkey is a very important factor. We can give the full list to anyone who wants it.

The point I want to make is that on March 27 the president announced that we would do an international contact group effort – a sentence no one noticed in his speech. But that's the kind of thing we do, and that's the kind of international coalition building.

When I began, John, I forgot to acknowledge properly the Center for American Progress. I was honored to have been part of your inaugural event in 2003, but I never was invited back. So – (laughter) – I had to bring the whole team. I think the CAP has done an extraordinary job of becoming a critical center for our efforts. And when we talked about where we should do our unveiling – however you want to call it – CAP seemed like the natural area.

I also want to say a word about John Podesta, who was chief of staff when I was at the United Nations and who I admire greatly. And I know for an absolute fact, based

on extensive discussions with people at the White House, that the role he played in North – the North Korea trip last week with former President Clinton was, and I quote senior members of the White House team, was “indispensable and invaluable,” and typically low key until he showed up wearing that Kim Il Sung button all over Las Vegas the other day, which troubled me a bit, John. But other than that, I congratulate you on your foray into the most remote country on Earth.

Our next speaker is Vali Nasr, another enormous asset, a man that most of you have seen on television many, many times. We’re so proud that he also has joined the government full time. Contrary to much stuff that’s been reported in the press, Vali does not work in Iran, even though he’s probably the nation’s leading expert on Shi’ism – and his book on Shi’ism is a bestseller in its field. And – but he works primarily in Pakistan, and he is helping shape our strategic attitude towards Pakistan. He’ll give you an overview from his point of view, and then we’ll plunge right into the operational experts. Vali?

MR. VALI NASR: Thank you. Good morning. I think it goes without saying that the fate of Afghanistan and Pakistan are inextricably linked together. If we thought about the recent focus on the case of Baitullah Mehsud and his apparent death, we can see that the fight against the Taliban now stretches across the boundaries of both countries, across the borders. And if there is an overarching objective, goal, for us, as Barney mentioned, is to create a regional framework that would bring into alignment American, Afghan, and Pakistani interests around these security issues. But equally important for our success is Pakistan’s stability. It is difficult to imagine a country of such vital strategic importance – and a vital key ally of the United States in that region – that faces a more daunting set of problems. Pakistan at this critical time as we speak is still struggling to consolidate its transition to democracy, at the same time as it has been facing a major Taliban offensive that has engulfed the country’s northwest frontier and has set off a major refugee crisis in Pakistan.

And equally important and perhaps not as much noted in the West, is that Pakistan’s economy in the past year has been battered by major financial crises, and most recently and notably, a severe electricity shortage that impacts businesses and people in equal measure.

Now, all along this year we’ve been directly and continuously engaged with Pakistan to see it through these challenges. For instance, my colleague Mary Beth Goodman has been working very closely with Pakistani officials and all the relevant agencies in Washington to put together just in time economic and energy assistance packages for Pakistan.

We are also engaged in intense international diplomacy, which Ambassador Holbrooke referred to right now, to create a much more broad based international support for Pakistan, for its development needs, for its security needs, and for facing the challenges before it. Going forward, we will continue to be very focused on Pakistan’s

stability, but also we will be working to bring Pakistan into our broader, region-wide framework for bringing peace to Afghanistan. I'll stop there.

MR. HOLBROOKE: Thank you, Vali. Vali's comment about refugees illustrates the whole concept of what Secretary Gates, after visiting this group, called the best whole of government process he'd ever seen. When the refugee crisis hit in western Pakistan, we had all the agencies involved in that in the – in our offices, so we were able to assemble them immediately that day, come up in about an hour and a half with a notional plan. That day Hillary Clinton was in New York giving a speech at NYU commencement address. She called in and said, "What are you doing about this?" We said, "We're meeting right now." She said, "I want to meet with you as soon as I land." By the time she landed and had finished an hour's meeting with this team, we had come up with the first \$110 million, which Hillary then announced at the White House. John can tell you, having been chief of staff, that that probably accelerated the response by a week to 10 days. And that is the value of this concept.

Now each person here ties into their home agency, and the – and Mary Beth Goodman, who Vali mentioned, is in the front row, is our indispensable economic expert.

But an example of that and the one we're going to start with is Otto Gonzalez. Although we try not to talk about which agency is our home agency, Otto is from the Department of Agriculture. He served in Afghanistan. He's part of a totally integrated AID / USDA team that works for us in agriculture. The other member of it, Beth, is sitting here. And Otto, you're on.

MR. OTTO GONZALEZ: Thank you, Ambassador Holbrooke. As many of you know, Afghanistan is a country where eight out of ten people are involved in agriculture, farming or herding or both. And it's a sector that was devastated by a quarter century of war, both physically and institutionally. We can't succeed in Afghanistan if the Afghan people aren't successful in agriculture. Yet despite that, over the past several years, as a government, we really spent more on trying to eradicate poppy than we did on trying to promote agriculture. We are remedying that now with a new strategy, agriculture assistance strategy that is fully resourced and that is aligned with the programs of the Afghan government and also, very importantly, is truly interagency within the U.S. government.

All of the main actors in agriculture in Afghanistan are from our government – the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Agency for International Development, where my colleague Beth Dunford is from, the U.S. Military on the provincial reconstruction teams, the Army National Guard Agribusiness Development teams, and also the Ministry of Agriculture of Afghanistan were all involved in developing a strategy that really aims to do two things. One is to increase agricultural sector jobs and incomes, and the other is to increase Afghans' confidence in their government, particularly the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock.

Now, I mentioned that this strategy is something new. It's bringing coherency to our program that we didn't have before. All of the U.S. government will be guided by a set of four main objectives. These objectives – we aim to increase agricultural productivity. We also aim to regenerate agribusiness. Another objective is to rehabilitate watershed management and to improve irrigation infrastructure. And our fourth objective, which really cuts across all of them, is to improve the Ministry of Agriculture's capacity to deliver services to farmers and herders and to promote the agricultural sector.

As I say, we do this in alignment with the Afghan government. We also do it with the great support of our secretary of agriculture, Tom Vilsack, who is personally committed to this effort and actually has launched a trilateral effort for agriculture which involves our government, Pakistan, and the Afghan government, where they are focusing on three main areas – strengthening food security, and rehabilitating watershed management, and improving agricultural trade.

So what we have is a strategy that is integrated, resourced, civilian and military, and one that really puts agriculture in the forefront where it needs to be in a country like Afghanistan.

MR. HOLBROOKE: Thank you, Otto. We have found so far that, of all of the programs we've done so far, this program, in conjunction with the phasing out of poppy crop eradication by the U.S. – Afghans may continue to do some, but we're out of that business. We're not at war with poppy farmers. We're at war with somebody else. And the military – General Petraeus and I, General McChrystal – we all see eye to eye. So the combination of phasing out poppy crop eradication, upgrading agriculture, and upgrading interdiction, which has had spectacular results. The military is taking down drug dealers, paraphernalia, drug bazaars, setting off vast bonfires of opium in the desert. This is the most successful thing we've done so far. And we have increasing evidence that it's really disrupting the Taliban internally, their financial efforts – Rami Shy will talk about that in a moment – and we're very – we're very pleased at the direction that's going.

From AID, we have two people Beth, whom Otto just mentioned, and also Sepideh Keyvanshad, who is here with us today. And she will pick it up – Sepideh will pick it up from Otto's presentation.

MS. SEPIDEH KEYVANSHAD: Thank you, Ambassador. Good morning everyone. Picking up on what Otto just discussed, we are changing the way we do business and provide development assistance, in both countries, focusing increasingly on capacity building and moving toward increased host country leads. That includes our programs to create jobs through economic development, improving governance, justice sector reform and rule of law, and our work in the social sector.

Under the direction of Ambassador Eikenberry and Ambassador Wayne in Afghanistan, we are substantially increasing the number of civilian staff. And that is allowing us to move away increasingly from the large contracts and the way we've done

business, in the past, and move more towards local implementers and improve the accountability of the way we do our programs.

Our increased capacity building efforts, in the ministries and at the sub national level, are allowing us to channel more of our funds directly through the government and allow us to do our programs more efficiently and implement our programs more efficiently.

Otto already mentioned the programs that we do with the agriculture ministry. We have already channeled some of our funds directly through two ministries in Afghanistan. That's the ministry of public health and the ministry of communications and information technology. And we are planning on doing more of that, in the next several months, as the ministries are – as ministries go through additional capacity building and can show that they actually use those funds properly.

Finally we're working increasingly through multilateral trust funds, providing additional resources to successful programs. And I'm sure all of you have heard about the National Solidarity Program. We are increasing our efforts in that area. And that is not the only program, as there are other successful programs that we're working with the World Bank on.

All of this is contributing to increased aid effectiveness, improved donor coordination, and finally to the ability of the host governments to take the lead. Thank you.

MR. HOLBROOKE: Our next speaker is from the Treasury Department, Rami Shy. You all know the subject he's going to talk about. It's elusive. It's complicated. A lot of it we really can't discuss in public, but it is very important. Rami?

MR. RAMI SHY: Thank you, Ambassador. Let me start by saying that this war is being fought on two fronts. In the shadow war on terrorist financing, choking off flows – the flow the funds to al Qaeda and the Taliban is as important to the success in Afghanistan as any action on the battlefield. These and other terrorist insurgent groups raise funds both internally and externally.

Internally, these funds come from the narcotics trade, extortion, kidnapping, other criminal acts. Externally, and possibly more significantly, these groups receive funds from donors in the Gulf and elsewhere.

Treasury Secretary Geithner and Undersecretary Levey have consistently raised these issues both domestically and abroad. To further expand and support these efforts across the U.S. government, we have formed the Illicit Finance Task Force to coordinate and strategically expand U.S. government initiatives to disrupt illicit finance activities that threaten our efforts in the region.

Some of the key interagency initiatives that we're working on include counter threat finance capacity building in coordination with the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Gulf countries, to further develop their abilities and identify, disrupt, and deter the fundraising and other financial activities of groups like al Qaeda, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba; activities that are critical not only to their ability to fund attacks but also to pay operatives, buy weapons, support their families, train recruits, travel, bribe officials.

Another is the joint U.S.-Russian Federation initiative to combat terrorist financing and the flow of Afghan heroin trafficking proceeds as part of the U.S.-Russia bilateral commission announced by Presidents Obama and Medvedev at the Moscow summit on July 6th.

I'm also working with Ashley Bommer and the Afghan Central Bank to expand the reach of mobile banking in Afghanistan to both economically empower those who don't have access to the formal banking system, and eventually use it to pay the Afghan National Army and Police salaries to combat corruption by removing cash from the battlefield.

And while not as glamorous, we're also exploring ways to ensure that those who do business with, or profit from, the U.S. government and other donor countries and organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan are paying the taxes that they are legally required to pay in those countries. Thank you.

MR. HOLBROOKE: Thank you, Rami. The next two presentations we're going to do together and I'll introduce both people together. My long time assistant chief of staff in New York, Ashley Bommer, who many of you know, and Vikram Singh, detailed by Secretary Bob Gates to our team, are focusing on the issue that many people call strategic communications. I prefer to call it what it really is. It is communications and counterpropaganda. And without a success in this field, everything else will be undermined. Ashley and Vikram?

MS. ASHLEY BOMMER: For the Taliban and al Qaeda information is as strong a weapon as a gun. Across Afghanistan and Pakistan have emerged militants who gain power through strategically timed radio broadcasts, videos, night letters, and CDs, and then ensure dominance through beheading, flogging, public executions, throwing acid on girls in school, and publicizing the names of the people they want to kill every single night.

Given the archaic values of al Qaeda and the Taliban, we must devise policies that expose the true nature of the militants. And we must shift the paradigm so that the debate is not between the United States and the militants, but between the people and the militants.

In order to do that, we are going to use 21st century technologies, including mobile and radio, to empower the people and denigrate the enemy. Their propaganda has

gone unchallenged. There are only four legal FM radio stations in the FATA – Radio Miram Shah, Razmak, Khyber and Wana – but only one, Radio Khyber, is fully operational. Meanwhile, there are over 150 illegal FM low wattage stations, run by militants, such as Fazlullah, Mangal Bagh, Haji Namdar, who are conducting a daily campaign of terror.

While cell phones are the fastest growing technology, 9.5 million in Afghanistan, 78 million in Pakistan, the Taliban are ordering the cell phone companies to power down the towers every single night in the south. And there is no cell phone access in North and South Waziristan. And with the lack of information, the links between poverty and terror ring hard and true. As Rami mentioned, mobile banking, in Afghanistan, 97 percent of the country is unbanked, and in Pakistan, over 60 percent of the country has no access to financial services, and certainly not in the FATA.

We are pursuing an expansion of mobile banking, mobile payments to the police to fight corruption, developing an insurance policy to protect the towers, and putting the towers on secure locations, as well as enhancing and developing community based radio stations. Initiatives like these and others are critical to supporting a communications and counter-propaganda strategy that protects and empowers the people on the ground.

MR. VIKRAM SINGH: Thanks, Ashley. Good morning. Thank you, everyone, for being here. What Ashley just discussed, a series of information efforts, are central to the strategic thinking of our adversaries' insurgency efforts. They fight an information war supported by military efforts on both sides of the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. We need to think a little bit more like our adversaries, and make our information efforts more central to our efforts to help our Afghan and Pakistani partners fight their counterinsurgency efforts. What those – the types of initiatives we're talking about, really amount to are extending the reach of communications and information to populations that really don't have anything other than what they get locally, which is often violent messages or intimidation from our adversaries.

It's about developing content that is compelling and competitive and can really – and can provide people a message that is – counters what they hear from insurgents. And it's building the capabilities of the private sectors and the governments in both of these countries to effectively communicate and engage with their own populations. It's about tying these populations to their governments in areas where they really, historically, have not had those ties. Critically, a lot of this hinges on making sure that our actions support our messages.

None of this is new in counterinsurgency, but getting on – getting a focus on it has required us to make changes. It's going to require us to continue making a number of significant changes. Early on, I think the most significant might be General McChrystal's rapid and tireless effort to reduce the number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. ISAF has also named Rear Admiral Greg Smith to head all of its information efforts and prevent the stove piping of public diplomacy and information

operations and other public affairs and other pieces of how we communicate to the Afghan government and their people.

Our focus is on marshalling resources – resources that have been scant, but that are now flowing – and ensuring that those resources can support this kind of strategic view of how the United States uses information. It's an entirely new level of effort to get this right, and it's critical to us actually succeeding.

MR. HOLBROOKE: Thank you, Vikram. Vikram mentioned Admiral Smith. He has been recently deployed by General Petraeus. We are in the process of recruiting a civilian counterpart for that job in Afghanistan. And we're also going to change the structure in Islamabad embassy to reflect this central priority. I say – after every presentation, I'm saying, nothing is more important, but it all depends, in the end, on communications.

Let's now turn to the elections. We have here two tremendous resources, in addition to the rest of the team, Rina Amiri and Jane Marriott, and I'll ask them to talk sequentially.

Rina is just back last night from Afghanistan. She worked for George Soros's OSI. Before that she was at the Bonn Conference that set up the current government. She worked for the United Nations during the last set of elections. She is well known in Afghanistan and in any circles of anyone who cares about Afghanistan. She recently joined the State Department.

And her colleague in this will speak with a rather funny accent. That's because she's not an American and she's not a State Department employee. Jane Marriott is on loan from the British government on a loan program, and we're enormously proud to have her here. And the other day I had the extraordinary experience of sitting in a National Security Council meeting in the White House, and we spent 30 minutes debating a paper she'd written. And I said I – I said to all my colleagues, "I have to tell you, you're all discussing a policy paper written by a British diplomat." And I mention that because it underscores how – we have other countries that work with us too. The Australians, the French, the Canadians all have people working in the department. This is not without precedent. But Jane is invaluable. And so we'll turn it over to Rina and Jane, and then I'll make some closing remarks.

MS. RINA AMIRI: Thank you. President Obama has referred to the upcoming presidential and provincial council elections in Afghanistan as the most important event of the year. Afghans would agree. I was born in Afghanistan, and I've had the privilege of being part of every political process since the Bonn process. And I've seen Afghans turn out over and over again, despite security concerns, despite shortcomings in the environment because they believe that these processes matter, because they believe that if we get this right, that Afghanistan is going to move one step away from political violence and a step further towards political stabilization.

These events are also quite historical in that they are their first Afghan – Afghan-administered elections in Afghanistan.

The elections are also quite historical because I think this is the most candidates that have competed for an election anywhere in the world. I think we're - Afghanistan is going into the Guinness Book of World Records. There's 41 candidates contesting the elections, including two women. The provincial council elections are being contested by 3,324 people for 420 seats. And 17 million people have registered to vote.

As the ambassador noted, I just came back from Afghanistan, and I can tell you that the campaign season is not very different from what we would see in the United States. There are campaign paraphernalia all over the country, checkered on people's houses, their cars. There are rallies, political rallies, taking place all over the country. The candidates are being interviewed on radio and television stations, where they're making a case for their campaigns. And there are pundits and there are polls of course. And the recent polls indicate that there are four serious contenders. President Karzai of course, the incumbent, is one of the leading contenders. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who's the former minister of foreign affairs, Dr. Ashraf Ghani, the former minister of finance, and Dr. Ramazan Bashedost, who's the former minister of planning and current parliamentarian.

Now, if one of these candidates does not secure 50 percent plus 1 of the votes, on August 20th, the elections will go into a second round in early October. One of the key questions is, what is the U.S. position vis-à-vis these elections and the candidates? And for that I'm going to turn to my colleague Jane Marriott. Thank you.

MS. JANE MARRIOTT: Thank you, Rina. We, the U.S. and the international community, want to see two things coming out of these elections. The first, we want to see them capitalize on the momentum of the policy debate that is being generated by these elections. And Rina has touched on the level of debate, both by the candidates and within the public itself within Afghanistan. So we want to see that momentum capitalized on, built on, the successful incumbent setting out his or her vision for Afghanistan that will be supported by the international community.

The second thing we want to see is that these elections continue to build up electoral institutions and civil society mechanisms within Afghanistan to make sure that the will of the people is known and elections can happen credibly, securely, and inclusively.

President Obama's June 16 statement really set the stage for our effort and made it clear that the U.S. is – and the international community are – actively impartial in these elections. We want elections that are credible, secure, and inclusive. And we want them to be seen as legitimate by the Afghans and the rest of the world.

How is this going to happen? Well, as Rina said, the Afghans are very much leading on this process. But what we are doing is we are reaching out. We have been

and we continue to reach out to the candidates, to all of the candidates, to encourage them to debate the issues and set out what their policy platforms are. We're encouraging the legitimacy of the process by supporting and holding to account the key electoral institutions – the IEC, the ECC, and the media commission, which is doing a good job of setting out what bias there may or may not be in the media in the Afghan press – and thirdly, by successfully pressing the principles of actual access to the media and transportation for the candidates, so they can actually get around the country and they can actually campaign properly.

The international community may also have a very subtle role to play after polling day if – as a role of impartial arbiters, if that's necessary, in the process.

I think what we're clear about is that these elections are the first Afghan held since the 1970s – they're being held in very difficult security conditions, and they won't be perfect. But we are equally clear that we expect everything possible to be done to minimize fraud, ensure the integrity of the ballot and the elections process to ensure that these elections are seen as and accepted as legitimate by the Afghan people and by the world. Thank you. Back to you, Ambassador.

MR. HOLBROOKE: Thank you, Jane. To Jane's right is Dan Feldman, who I'm sure most of you know. Dan is our – one of our two deputies, and he'll be available for questions. Our other deputy, Paul Jones, is on family leave today. So that's our team minus the FBI, DHS, CIA, and Major General Field. And I'm sorry they aren't able to be here.

On the elections, as Rina mentioned, President Obama has called this the most important event this year in Afghanistan. Why do we say that even though this election is undoubtedly – as has been well reported – a very difficult event?

Holding an election in a wartime situation is always difficult. Holding one when the enemy has said they're going to try to disrupt it makes it even more difficult. And holding it under the historic conditions which Rina, Barney, and Jane already alluded to – and they could go on forever about how this relates to the tribes and the ethnic groups and the history of the country – is even more daunting. But a government needs legitimacy, and this election was called for under the constitution for April 21, 2009.

When President Obama took the oath of office on January 20, it was apparent that this could not be done on schedule because of decisions made last year; decisions which I, for one, publicly criticized as a private citizen. The decision to ignore the constitution and delay the election has caused a reorientation of our priorities for the first six and a half months of this administration. And many issues that we would like to focus on – anti-corruption, a national reintegration amnesty program, improving the governance at the sub-central level, which Barney and others alluded to – Sepideh particularly mentioned it – all of these issues are vitally important in an overall counterinsurgency effort. And we're working on them, but until the election legitimizes the government, whoever wins, we are – we have had to focus on that.

As all of you recall, if you followed Afghanistan, when we came into office the country faced a constitutional crisis over whether the – how to deal with the fact that the – with the aiding and abetting of the international community, the Afghan constitution – the one Rina helped draft – was not going to be carried out. Imagine what would happen in the United States if people announced that the election would be delayed indefinitely. Well, that's what we inherited. And the opposition said it's not going to be legitimate, and who's going to rule. And we spent most of the spring helping the Afghan government see it through to the August 20 date coming up next week. So this election matters, and we will see what happens.

I will be leaving the day after tomorrow for Afghanistan and Pakistan – in reverse order, Pakistan first, then Afghanistan – then I'll fly to Istanbul, where the Turks are hosting a Friends of Democratic Pakistan meeting. And the president's asked me to be on the scene during the elections. But I do want to emphasize that we have an extremely strong team in the American embassy and in the military command. Ambassador Eikenberry is superb and, as the former commander of the forces in Afghanistan, has a unique ability to integrate civilian and military issues. His deputy, Frank Ricciardone, deputy ambassador, was our ambassador in two of the world's largest American embassies, Egypt and the Philippines. The number three person, who was already mentioned, Tony Wayne, was a former assistant secretary of state, and just came directly from Buenos Aires as ambassador. The number four person, Joe Mussomeli, is a former ambassador as well. And we have an additional election unit out there, headed by Ambassador Tim Carney.

On the United Nations side, Kai Eide runs a superb operation, and his senior deputy is an American, Peter Galbraith, who served as our first American ambassador to Croatia and was Sergio Vieira de Mello's deputy in East Timor. So he has long U.N. experience.

And on the military side, Admiral Mullen and General Petraeus have, plain and simple, sent the first team in. Stan McChrystal and David Rodriguez are the two best people now available in the United States Army. And as Vikram importantly said – and I want to draw your attention to this – the best counterpropaganda is to reduce civilian casualties. And the rules of engagement have changed in a way which has produced a visible result on the ground. And if it's been less news coverage of that issue lately, it's because there's been less of that terrible problem to deal with.

So in closing in my opening remarks, I want to be very clear. We know the difference with input and output, and what you're seeing here is input. Agriculture, rule of law, counternarcotics, the illicit financing – that's what we're doing. The payoff is still to come.

We have to produce results, and we understand that. And we're not here today to tell you we're winning or we're losing. We're not here today to say we're optimistic or pessimistic. We're here to tell you that we're in this fight in a different way with a

determination to succeed under the direct personal supervision of the president, secretary of state, and the rest of the cabinet.

And so I want to close with that and turn it back over to John. And John, thanks again for the Center for American Progress doing this today.

MR. PODESTA: Thank you, Richard. I want to come back to the election, but I want to – I'm going to ask a few questions, and then we're going to open things up beginning with the press. But I want to come back to the elections, but I want to pick up, perhaps, where you left off and ask a larger strategic question, which is that – and let me begin by noting that when the president announced the policy after the 60-day review, he laid out what appeared to be, I think, in the minds of many people, a very narrow objective, which was to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent their return to either country in the future.

But to actually execute against that very narrow definition of what the project was all about, you need a broad strengthening of the governmental capacity and security forces in Afghanistan. You need a stronger, more committed partner in Pakistan. I think this team reflects that, and reflects a much larger strategy than what is embedded in that very narrow definition that the president used on March 27. I think probably Ambassador Eikenberry's budget request that was recently reported reflects that again. So in that context, from the perspective of the American people, how do you define clear objectives of what you're trying to succeed as outputs with the inputs that you just talked about? How do you measure success against that broader array of problems and inputs?

MR. HOLBROOKE: A very key question, John, which you're alluding to is, of course, if our objective is to defeat, destroy, dismantle al Qaeda, and they're primarily in Pakistan, why are we doing so much in Afghanistan? It's a legitimate question. It was addressed directly by Hillary Clinton in her July 15 speech at the Council on Foreign relations here in Washington. And it's a relatively simple connection, but it needs to be very explicitly stated. Al Qaeda and the Taliban, or to be more precise, the Taliban, because Pakistan Taliban and Afghan Taliban have some connections, but they are also separate in many ways, and it's very elusive to analyze the interconnections – and by the way, in the aftermath of Baitullah Mehsud's apparent death, there's all sorts of reports that you've all read in the papers of infighting, and there's going to be some major readjustment coming up. We don't know what it is. We have many theories. But the connections are clear. If Afghanistan is fertile recruiting territory for the Taliban, it gives the – it gives al Qaeda more of a terrain from which to operate. Unless the Taliban were to renounce explicitly al Qaeda, they are basically fighting in support of one another. So they are allies.

In Secretary Clinton's speech – and I would draw your attention to this – she laid out the fact that if – that the – that we would support the reintegration into Afghan society of any people fighting with the Taliban who renounce al Qaeda and lay down their weapons and reintegrate peacefully. But on your key point, the question we're always asked, I think it needs to be stated very clearly that if you abandon the struggle in

Afghanistan, you will suffer against al Qaeda as well. But we have to be clear on what our national interests are here.

MR. PODESTA: I guess what I'm asking is, can we settle for a reconciliation process, a weak state and continued intervention, destruction of al Qaeda forces in Pakistan as we've seen just this last week?

MR. HOLBROOKE: I think that – you say a weak state –

MR. PODESTA: Is that an acceptable end state?

MR. HOLBROOKE: – I think we have to be realistic about Afghanistan. As Barney said at the outset, it's the poorest nation in the world outside of Africa. It's been torn apart by 30 years of war. We're going to help rebuild it. The military part of this struggle with American troops is not an open ended event, but our assistance – our civilian assistance is going to continue for a long time. I can't give you dates. And we will help strengthen the government. That has to be part of our mandate.

The specific goal you ask, John – is really – it's really hard for me to address in specific terms. But I would say this about defining success in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the simplest sense, the Supreme Court test for another issue, we'll know it when we see it.

MR. PODESTA: Okay. Let me – Rina gave a very great, I think, backdrop to the election. Let me ask you a question about that. I think that some observers believe that it's not the Taliban or the insurgency that's so strong, it's that the government of Afghanistan is so weak. And that there's a lot being built into – you quoted the president with respect to being the most important event this year – there's a lot built into this election. But do we have any expectation that this national election – that includes provincial elections – will change the weakness of the government going forward once those elections have taken place?

MR. HOLBROOKE: Couldn't be a more important issue for us. In fact, John, the president has asked us – and asked particularly Ambassador Eikenberry – to focus on that issue. And without going into too many details, let me say that after the post-election phase is completed – and I stress that we aren't going to know on the evening of August 20 who won. CNN is not going to call this election.

MR. PODESTA: Well, they may, but we still won't know. (Laughter.)

MR. HOLBROOKE: So, actually, all 41 candidates might call it. But the process will take a while. The ballots have to be brought into Kabul. They have to be counted. There are hundreds and hundreds of observers out there. I think something like six or 800 journalists have already registered to cover it from around the world, including, I think, some of you in this room. We – after this process has determined a winner – and there'll be disputes, as there are in American elections. We only picked a senator from

Minnesota just a few weeks ago, after a rather lengthy delay. And so after this is settled, we will be looking to the government. And when I say we, I want to echo what Jane Marriott said. “We” means the international community. This has been one of the main topics that I’ve discussed with my 24 or 25 counterparts. We will be asking the government to reinvigorate, or invigorate if it’s a different president, the leadership in these fields that you’ve heard today.

The reason we started with agriculture is that that was the – we started our presentations with agriculture today, we started our efforts with agriculture – was, that was the least controversial program. And, astonishingly, the U.S. government was spending more money eradicating poppy crops than building up agriculture. It made no sense to us. By reversing it, we were able to jump start that issue. But many issues, like reintegration, amnesty, anti-corruption, are deferred, as I said earlier. And, John, we’re going to be trying very hard to help the Afghans.

I want to go back to something Sepideh said. We, when – another thing we discovered when we came into office was that less than 10 percent of American assistance was going through the government. It was going to contractors. If any of you are in this room, be warned. We’re going to try to cut the contracts down. We just have to because of the way they’re – because of the way they work. They’re not flexible. They undermine the very government we’re trying to strengthen. An example – we found a \$30 million contract for women’s programs that was going to be given out to somebody, to some NGO or to some consultant. And we just canceled the contract and turned the money over to the embassy for an ambassador’s fund on women programs. That way we can increase our flexibility and we can respond to this hugely important issue. And Secretary Clinton’s women’s adviser, your old colleague Melanne Vermeer, went out there with Ashley Bommer and they had a fantastic trip. And we have a whole action plan for women.

These programs will be implemented. We have about 20 of them. We only discussed a few today – after the election, with whoever is elected, because we have to try to strengthen the government, bearing in mind all the inherent problems. The biggest single problem we’re going to face – I want to be very honest with you – is going to be strengthening the police. There’s no question, and unfortunately we didn’t have our police team here today. And it’s a whole different issue. But the police in any analysis of guerrilla wars, counterinsurgencies – I’ve spent a lot of my life working in these areas – you can’t do it unless the police take over a key role in security, after the military forces do the clearing. This point was made quite well, in an article I don’t entirely agree with, in last weekend’s *Wall Street Journal*. I don’t agree with everything in it, but the emphasis on police was correct.

So we have a vast array of programs, which have been deferred by the delay in the election, which we hope to emphasize as the military pushes forward and disrupts the Taliban.

That in turn, going back to your first question, John – that, in turn, we know will weaken the links between Taliban and al Qaeda. And in – together with the dramatic events in Pakistan, in the last week and a half, which are enormously important, but we don't know exactly how – we just know they're important – are the direction we're trying to go.

MR. PODESTA: I've been throwing my questions to Richard. But please feel free to bring your colleagues in as well. Let me – I'm just going to ask a couple more and then open it up again beginning with the press. But another vexing question in my mind is the role of Iran in the region. We had cooperation in the early days of the war there from Iran. Now we're putting tremendous economic and diplomatic pressure on the Iranian government to deal with the nuclear program, support for terrorism, the failed election in Iran. Do we need support from Iran in Afghanistan to succeed? What's the tradeoff? Maybe another way of asking that question is, what's the greater threat to national security, if you can opine on that, what's going on in Iran and what's going on in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

MR. HOLBROOKE: I can't tell you what's the greater threat because a nuclear Iran would be a very great threat not only to us but to everyone. Nor do I work on Iran. But I do want to make very clear that while I don't have an Iranian counterpart, the – we recognize geography and its realities. And anyone in this room who's been to Herat, as Ashley Bommer and I have on a trip, and many of the others, you know that Herat is in a kind of a cultural-economic orbit with political influence from Iran.

Iran has a legitimate role to play in the resolution of the Afghan issue, but whether they'll play it or not depends on a lot of other critical factors. And that's really about all I'd like to say on that issue now. But we are completely aware of the Iranian factor. And they went – and I would also draw your attention to one other fact. On April 17, in Tokyo, at the Pakistan pledging conference, the Iranians came and pledged \$330 million in an international conference, to Pakistan. So they are a factor. And to pretend they're not, as was often done in the past, doesn't make much sense. And you pointed out a critical point, that in Bonn, where Rina was, they did help stand up the current government.

MR. PODESTA: My last question, which is going to the other side of the geography, which is the relationship between Pakistan and India. Is it critical that the United States try to play a role, is in – that's often really problematic, I think, particularly with respect to the Indians in terms of diffusing tension between India and Pakistan, particularly in Kashmir, or is that outside the portfolio of this group?

AMB. HOLBROOKE: It is outside the portfolio of my job, on one hand. On the other hand, I am in constant touch with the Indians. I met with the Indians continually. The new ambassador in Washington and I have had dinner recently, and she and I are in close touch. I go to India whenever the schedule permits. I stress we're completely transparent. The secretary of state and my close colleague, Assistant Secretary for South Asia and Central Asian Affairs Bob Blake, were in India recently, and the Indians are a

major factor in the region. They're the dominant power. We have – improving U.S.-Indian relations has been a continual goal of the last three administrations, all of whom have been successful in that regard, I think starting really with President Clinton's trip in 2000. And we will keep the Indians fully informed. And I have an Indian counterpart, who I keep fully informed, in India.

MR. PODESTA: Okay. I'm going to open it up. (Inaudible.)

Q: Ambassador Holbrooke, I know – (off mike) – I'm not going to stand, so I don't block the cameras.

MR. PODESTA: Please identify yourself.

Q: Martha Raddatz from ABC News. Ambassador Holbrooke, I know you want to talk about the civilian side of this, but the security –

AMB. HOLBROOKE: But you don't. (Laughter.)

Q: – but the security is so intertwined. Tell me how that is affecting what you're trying to do, what kind of a hindrance that is, what has to happen in order for you to succeed. And as part of that, I want to say that a lot of people I talk to – civilians in Afghanistan – complain that they really can't go outside the wire in certain areas because of the security.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: You mean the Americans.

Q: Yes.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Well, let me start with the second question, because we're really changing that, Martha. I don't – when's the last time you were in Kabul?

Q: About a month or so ago.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: You may have noticed then that – you say the wire. The first thing that the new team did was cut the wire down, symbolically, around the compound. They used to need permission – they used to have to drive in an armored car from the embassy across the street to the AID compound. They had to drive. That's all being changed. They have changed the curfew regulations. They've extended the curfew from midnight to 2 a.m. You no longer need 72-hour prior permission to leave the compound. You can leave on – you don't need permission at all. You just notify people where you're going. It made no sense to any of us when we came in. We send people over there, and we don't – we put them under restraints. They can't work. Now we have to protect them, but we are doing it to give them much more discretion.

We've also guaranteed any person who goes to Afghanistan for the United States government that if his or her spouse wishes to work in the mission, we will guarantee

them a job. So for the first time we have tandem couples in significant numbers, starting with Ambassador Eikenberry himself.

And so on that point, we agree with you completely. It was a self denying situation. And it will be – I will continue to talk about it with the security officers and Ambassador Eikenberry.

On your first point, I – of course security is the underlying component. That's why I mentioned the police. And without security you can build a school, you can build a bridge, and one grenade – one mine sets it off. So we understand the – completely the integration of the two.

But, as you've seen – and this is reflected in a lot of the reporting that's been done lately, including the *Washington Post* piece on page three this morning by Karen DeYoung and her colleague – we are trying to integrate the civilian and military. General Petraeus and I and our whole teams have had two full day sessions on all this to integrate. And if I go into the details, I'm going to take up a lot of time which – for something you already know. But of course you can't do civilian growth unless you have security. It's obvious.

Q: Do you want to talk about the troop question?

AMB. HOLBROOKE: What?

Q: Do you want to talk about the troop question? (inaudible) I have to give it a try. (inaudible) Do we need more troops?

AMB. HOLBROOKE: I think that General McChrystal and Secretary Gates, General Petraeus, have addressed the troop question very fully, and I think there's a process under way; the integrity of which I think we must respect.

MR. PODESTA: (Off mike.)

Q: Beth Mendelson with Voice of America, the Afghanistan service. If one of the candidates doesn't get 50 percent and this goes into a second round and things get complicated there, what are the constitutional laws that are in place? Can Karzai call a loya jirga and also – if it goes the way some of the things did in Iran, what is the United States prepared to do in these circumstances?

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Rina?

MS. AMIRI: Sure. I'd like Barney to comment on this as well. Under – if there are security – if there is a security situation, then there are stipulations where a loya jirga can be called. But I'd like Barney to speak in more detail about this as well.

MR. RUBIN: Well, I'm not sure what your question is about. According to the constitution, if no one gets more than 50 percent of the vote, then a second round has to

be held within two weeks from the date of the announcement of the result. Now, perhaps your question is, what if there is a civil conflict and it is not possible to do that? We, of course, do not want to address hypothetical questions like that. There are – there's an international presence, an Afghan government that are – is our partner. And if such an unfortunate scenario should arise, there are policies and institutions on the ground to address it.

MR. PODESTA: We're going to come over to this side.

Q: Thank you, John. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Obviously, the –

MR. PODESTA: Identify yourself, please.

Q: I'm Jon-Christopher Bua, with Sky News. The British and U.S. troops, as well as the NATO troops, will be watching this very closely within their own compound. What message does this administration and do you, Mr. Ambassador, want to project to the troops in country right now?

AMB. HOLBROOKE: You mean what message do we want to address to the allied – U.S. and allied troops?

Q: Yes. Yes, in terms of the election and –

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Every trip we make out there, we always meet with the troops, and we talk to them about why they're there to find out how they feel at the lowest levels – particularly way out on the front lines, which are really dangerous. And I think the troops really do – they don't – they don't love it out there. They're carrying 120 pounds of equipment on their back in 120-degree heat – and I'm not making those numbers up – and it is an extraordinary thing to see. But they know why they're there. They know exactly – going back to John Podesta's opening question, they understand the causal connection between their presence and 9/11. They understand their mission. And they are now more and more trained for the integrated civilian military.

Otto – you may have noticed that Otto mentioned in his agriculture presentation the National Guard units from Texas, Nebraska, several states had agricultural development teams, which they're very proud of, in uniform. The military is supporting these programs, and we're supporting theirs. Vikram discussed the integration on strategic communications, counterpropaganda.

I stress. Nobody likes to be out there. It's very tough work. But I felt that they really understood it.

MR. PODESTA: Let's go to this side of the room. Let's start with Karen, then we'll take a question over there. Karen?

Q: Karen DeYoung, with the *Washington Post*. I'd like to go back to the question of Iran. Barney Rubin said that we were in regular consultations with all major neighbors who have a stake in Afghanistan, and I wondered what that meant in terms of Iran. And also, if you could give us an up to date assessment of Iranian activities in Afghanistan, particularly the provision of weapons, training, and advice to insurgents.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Well, Karen, in regard to all neighbors and regular contact, Barney did not mean to include Iran. They – we don't have any direct contacts with them on this. But you can judge for yourself by their statements. And what was the second part of your question? I'm sorry.

Q: (Off mike.)

AMB. HOLBROOKE: What?

MR. PODESTA: Are they training?

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Oh, Are the Iranians training? We get – we get conflicting reports on that. Vikram, do you want to address that?

MR. SINGH: There certainly – I don't – I didn't comment on it, wouldn't want to get into any sort of current – the most current information I don't actually have. Certainly the Iranians have in the past provided some arms to certain – to some groups inside Afghanistan. I do not think it has been viewed, from a defense perspective, as a substantial effort or a substantial threat. I do not have the most recent information for you however.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: I think for the benefit of people who don't follow this issue closely, I'd add one very publicly known but under-examined fact. Iran has arguably the highest – the largest problem, as a percentage of adult population, of drug addiction in the world. And those drugs are coming across the Afghan border. And it is a major concern to them. They've admitted to a very high number. Don't hold me to this, but I think 5 million. It may be higher. And there is obviously a very high imperative on this.

You also will note that in the declaration that President Obama and President Medvedev gave during the trip, during the Moscow trip, there was a specific paragraph on the Russian concern, with the drug trade in Afghanistan and its effect on Russia, with a particular emphasis on precursor chemicals.

So I mention this, because if you look – Barney said earlier about strategic parallelism but not fully integrated policies. There are these issues, which every other country – in the region and all the way through to Europe – and this includes another Afghan neighbor, China, all share. And this is one of them.

MR. PODESTA: (Off mike.)

Q: Yes, hi. Simon Denyer from Reuters. I just – I wanted to pick up on something that Ashley and Vikram are talking about, propaganda. The Taliban are going around telling people, in Afghanistan, that the Russians were here for 10 years. The Americans have been here for seven. Stick around. We're going to be on the winning side. And it's changing that perception of who the winning side is going to be, which is crucial to getting the villagers to actually support your goals. And I just wondered. I understand that the military commitment can't be open-ended, that the goals have to be realistic, but can you really tell the Afghan people – you're here, the military's here till you provide security, development, and democracy, and not just at a presidential level, but democracy at a local level, too? Is that commitment still there from the international community to do that?

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Great question. Barney and Rina, would you comment?

MR. RUBIN: Well, first, you're – you accurately describe the message from the Taliban. The situation, however, is quite different. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was condemned by virtually the entire world community, and the Soviet – it was one of the major factors actually isolating the Soviet Union. The operation in Afghanistan, of which the U.S. is a part and in which it plays a leading role, is perhaps the most fully multilateral operation in history, which commands the support of – at least officially, if not unofficially, as I mentioned – of virtually every government and every international organization.

I don't think it's accurate to say that we are committed to waging a war in Afghanistan until Afghanistan is a perfect democracy – which seems to be what you imply – and nor would we make – would we expect people to believe such an unrealistic commitment. But I believe we are committed – and it is realistic to ask people to believe – that we are committed to fight there until we are secure from terrorist attacks launched from there and until the region is secure from the danger of nuclear terrorism and other forms of destabilization that would be extremely dangerous.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Rina.

MS. AMIRI: I just wanted to note about where Taliban support lays. One of the first places that I went when I returned back to Afghanistan at the beginning of 2002 was – (inaudible) – right after Taliban fell. And overnight, you could see that there was a tremendous level of enthusiasm for this process from the Afghan population. The Afghan population does want this process to succeed, and what they need to see is a commitment. And I do believe that the changes that this administration has brought about is certainly something that Afghans – increasing confidence among the Afghan people.

Afghans are pragmatic. They're realistic. They just want to be – be confident that they are going to have a partner in this process, and I think that that's something that this administration is showing and demonstrating.

MR. PODESTA: Why don't we go to the front and then – we'll come to you now.

Q: My name is Spozhmai Maiwandi. I'm with the South Asia division of Voice of America. And my question is about the legitimacy of the elections. Only early this week, I think it was the British ambassador in Afghanistan who said there will be a very low turnout and also the security issues. Who is going to decide the results of elections to be legitimate? And the concern is here that, you know, in Afghanistan they're watching the situation in Iran.

(Cross talk.)

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Now this is obviously a central issue. Who will decide the legitimacy of the election? There are thousands of observers, international and domestic. There is going to be enormous media, including the Voice of America. I gave you an interview yesterday about all this. But my own answer is, it ends up being the media, frankly – not an answer that John Podesta probably thinks is the right one. But the truth is that all of what happens in any distant place is in the end reduced to the simple headlines of media. And you take the three most obvious recent examples – Iran, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. No one knows what actually happened there. What you know is what you think you know, thanks to the media. In all three cases, by the way, I think they covered it quite accurately, and I know something about those countries.

So I'll leave it to you to report. We're going to do the best we can, along the lines we discussed earlier. As everyone here has said, nobody is looking for a level of perfection in an election to which we ourselves don't always achieve, to put it mildly. (Laughs.)

And the – so we're just going to do the best we can. This election was called for under the constitution. It shouldn't have been delayed. It was. We have put an enormous amount of effort into it – “we” being the international community.

MS. MARRIOTT: Sorry – if I may add to that, Ambassador, everyone – I'm mean obviously it will be the Independent Electoral Commission will be the body that ultimately decides what the result is. And I think the point is that it will be about the media and the international election as observers and – (inaudible) – statements in behaving responsibly, in not speculating too much and allowing the IEC to take forward its work, allowing the Electoral Complaints Commission to address and adjudicate on complaints, and coming up with the result that is the best possible achievable in those circumstances.

(Cross talk.)

Q: – could you just state the front end of that – of your answer again?

MS. MARRIOTT: So yeah. The front end was, ultimately the Afghan electoral authority, the Independent Electoral Commission, will have sort of the ultimate say on the result of the election and its – making sure we don't speculate, I think, too much on the legitimacy claims.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: And will there be challenges to the election? There are in every other democracy. I think we should assume those.

Q: Arnaud de Borchgrave, CSIS. Ambassador, it's generally recognized that Afghanistan is un-winnable as long as the Taliban and al Qaeda have privileged sanctuaries in FATA, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas on the Afghan border. And I'm just wondering why FATA didn't even come up this morning.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Well, we did talk about FATA, but there were no questions on it. And I agree with the premise of your question in its larger framework. But I prefer to use the word "succeed" rather than "win," because this war isn't going to end on the – at the battleship Missouri or, as you alone in this room can attest, in Geneva, as you were at that famous conference. The issue of Pakistan and the sanctuaries is central to success. That's why President Obama took these two countries – and Hillary Clinton – and asked for a separate organization, which you see here before you.

Just for a point of reference on how different it is, up to January 20th, Afghanistan and Pakistan were not only in the South Asia bureau, but they had different deputy assistant secretaries in charge of them. So the integration – there was no integration until you got up about three levels. Now we have a single desk, and everyone in this room, on this podium and my colleagues here, works on both countries and with all the other countries.

Now to your question. This is an enormously important issue. The end of Baitullah Mehsud, as we all know, is a very big deal. And, as I said earlier, we don't know how it's going to play out. But we know that the reports you've been reading in the press, the disarray among his people, of other factions maneuvering – al Qaeda has to decide what to do, because Baitullah Mehsud was sort of like an independent subsidiary of al Qaeda focused on Pakistan, but some of the other groups in the area were focused on Afghanistan. Everyone is thrashing around. There are unconfirmed reports of a shootout during a leadership meeting. This is very good news for all of us. Equally important, Arnaud, the Pakistani people are converging on a consensus on the importance of this. I think this will pave the way for redoubled efforts. And I know we're running out of time, but I'd like to ask Vali, who is really one of the great experts on this – he lived in Pakistan for years. He has a network of friends there which is extraordinary – if he wants to make an additional comment.

MR. NASR: To add to that, I think it's no longer useful to think of this as just a sanctuary contributing to the fight in Afghanistan. FATA is still a very important locale for Afghan Taliban as well as Pakistani Taliban, but it now sits in a much larger zone of Taliban operations that runs much farther south and east and much farther north. And

what we are seeing, as I mentioned, is that – to bring Pakistani and American and Afghan interests into an alignment to deal with what is now much broader regional problems. So what we are actually seeing is – just as the United States is pushing, and the international forces against the Taliban from the north – the Pakistanis have engaged. And the ultimate conclusion of this fight against the Pakistani Taliban will have to have a resolution of the FATA problem.

So we are seeing much more of a hammer and anvil approach. And in order to succeed, we have to maintain that kind of a relationship and cooperation with Pakistan.

MR. PODESTA: Robert, last question.

Q: Good morning. I'm Bob Dreyfuss, from *The Nation* Magazine. Do you think, when you're involved in all of this, do you have in mind that there's a domestic political clock here in which Americans could look at this and, as you said, know that when they see it, and decide that this isn't succeeding? And also, do you think that Kai Eide's comments about negotiating with the Taliban leadership were helpful and constructive and something –

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Whose comments?

Q: Kai Eide, the U.N. –

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Kai Eide. Yes, right, right, right.

Q: – Eide, yes – were helpful, in terms of saying that we should start talking to the top leadership of the Taliban, rather than trying to peel away people at the local level.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: On the second question, I haven't seen the full text. And in the context I saw them in, they seemed to me to be consistent with our positions and those of everyone else.

On your first question, I can't answer your question. No one can. But I can tell you that we all feel the impatience and pressure of the American public and the Congress, which legitimately wants to see progress. That's an absolutely legitimate thing. And we have spent a great deal of time talking to members of Congress and reaching out to groups – never in this configuration, this is unique for us – but to talk about this. And so far it seems to me that people understand how critically important this is.

Do we need to show progress? Of course. We can't make these investments without having some demonstration that they have results. And that's why I said earlier, I don't want to confuse input and output.

You've seen input today. And we've answered your questions about what's going on on the ground. But we're very mindful of the fact that we need to show that all

these programs you've heard about today – frankly unveiled in this context, in this manner, for the very first time – have to produce results.

Maybe John will invite us back in a year, and you can hold us to account. But I'll leave that to him.

MR. PODESTA: That is an open invitation. Let me close by noting that when Richard began his remarks, he noted that he was at our launch event for the Center for American Progress. He said he hadn't been invited back. I reminded him that we invited him back many times for private consultations. But it's sometimes dangerous to give him a microphone. (Laughter.) But the real reason he hadn't been back at the mike was, we were waiting for a tremendous encore of that. And I want to thank him and his colleagues for being so open, for presenting the strategy here and the many components that, I think, are going into U.S. policy at this stage. I commend him. It's a very challenging context in which to work. We look forward to seeing what happens next week during the elections. But you have an – you have a standing invitation to come back and report on how we're operating against the metrics and objectives that you laid out today. So thank you very much for being here.

AMB. HOLBROOKE: Thank you, John.

(Applause.)

(END)