CSIS-TCU Schieffer Series

“The U.S. Withdraws: Syria and Afghanistan”

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CSIS Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

INTRODUCTION
H. Andrew Schwartz
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MODERATOR
Bob Schieffer
CSIS Trustee

FEATURING
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Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Director, Middle East Program, CSIS

Melissa Dalton
Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, International Security Program, and Director, Cooperative Defense Project, CSIS

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Nancy Youssef
National Security Correspondent, The Wall Street Journal

Transcript by superiortranscriptions.com
Andrew Schwartz: Good evening. If everybody could file in and take a seat, that’d be great. We usually do the Schieffer Series at 5:30. But I’m starting to think, by the size of this crowd, 4:30 might be better. So welcome. I guess traffic’s a little light because – we know why. Steve Flanagan is here. That’s a really good thing. Welcome. Former colleague Steve Flanagan. We couldn’t do this series without TCU and the Schieffer College of Communication. So we thank them. And we thank the Niarchos Foundation for their generous support.

And with that, I’d like to turn it to our CSIS trustee Bob Schieffer. And one other really great fact about Bob Schieffer, who is now celebrating his 50th year at CBS News. Bob. (Applause.)

Bob Schieffer: In progress following audio break) – that I was a reporter for quite a while before I came to work at CBS News. That wasn’t my first job out of college. But it’s been a – it’s been a great journey.

I’ve sort of titled this today: Syria, Afghanistan, are we in, out, or in between? And I hope we can get closer to the answer to that today, because the answer is it depends on who you ask and when you ask it. But those kind of details and complications have never stopped us before, because that’s what we do here at CSIS. We try to sort out complicated things by getting the smartest people we can find. And we found them. And I would say about this group, it’s like that insurance commercial on television. They know a lot of things because they’ve seen a lot of things. This is a first – a first team here.

Dr. Jon Alterman is an author, former State Department official, award-winning Harvard professor, where he received his Ph.D., and is a director of the CSIS Mideast program. You have extended biographies of everybody in your program, so I’ll just introduce them briefly.

Melissa Dalton, here at my left, deputy director of CSIS International Security Programs. Has held numerous positions at the Pentagon, was the senior policy advisor to the commander of U.S. forces in Kabul, and a senior intelligence analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Seth Jones, here in the yellow tie, he holds the Harold Brown chair at CSIS, director of the International Threats Project. Prior to CSIS, he was at the RAND Corporation. He’s the author of many books, has served in key defense posts. And his Ph.D. is from the University of Chicago.

And finally, Nancy Youssef, our old friend and a good friend of CSIS. She is the national – one of the national security correspondents now for The Wall Street Journal. She has won numerous awards for her work with the McClatchy and Knight Ridder newspapers, has served at various times as their Pentagon correspondent and bureau chief in both Baghdad and in Cairo.

So with that, let’s try to untangle what’s going on right now in Syria.

And, Jon, let me just start with you. Give us the latest news because everything changes. In every news cycle, something new happens and something else is taken
away. What is the situation right now in Syria? Are we in, are we out, are we in the process of leaving? Just how would you sum up the latest news about Syria?

Jon B. Alterman: We are in the process of getting out. We are working out the precise modalities of it. What I find disturbing, to be honest, is the way we’re getting out means we have almost no control or much less control than we would otherwise have over what we leave behind.

It seems to me that the U.S. strategic goal in Syria should be that we grasp the fact that what will really matter, what will endure in Syria is what's negotiated between the parties going forward. And by announcing that we are summarily withdrawing, we have taken ourselves out of those negotiations, we've undermined our leverage in those negotiations. And just as the president, as a candidate, criticized the Obama administration for don’t tell your enemy what you’re going to do, it’s precisely the same thing. If he had negotiated over the terms of the American withdrawal, he could have gotten concessions from the Assad governments, from the Iranians, from the Russians, from the Turks, all of whom have interests in this area the U.S. is going to leave.

But by saying we're leaving unconditionally and immediately, all of those parties will make all of their own deals. And U.S. interests and the U.S. ability to influence what endures was reduced overnight from a reasonable amount to virtually zero.

Bob Schieffer: Melissa, let me ask you, why should we be concerned about this? A lot of times, people say, what were we doing there in the first place? Whether we should have been there or not have been there, we were there and now we’re dealing with what do we do next.

Melissa Dalton: Thanks, Bob. And it’s a true pleasure to be joining this distinguished panel and joining all of you for the discussion this evening on this important topic.

I think it really boils down to three main issues in terms of why Syria matters to the United States. What happens in Syria doesn’t stay in Syria. I think we’ve seen, whether it’s terrorism threats, the spread of refugees and the terrible humanitarian situation, that the spillover effects of conflict instability in Syria has manifold effects in the region, into Europe and in ways that I think were very hard to forecast rolling back to the tape to 2011, 2012 timeframe when we saw the grassroots revolutionary movement in Syria uprising.

I think the other piece to keep in mind is that our competitors can very easily fill the gaps into which we are departing. They have been actively exploiting our vulnerabilities in the region for the last few years, whether that’s Russia in 2015 inserting itself into Syria, Iran certainly over the last decade increasing its destabilizing activities in the region and now through its activities and capability development in Syria itself mounting an expeditionary military capability that can be leveraged in multiple ways, whether it’s in Yemen, in other places in the region, and U.S. forces, working in close proximity to these competitors, has afforded these competitors an opportunity to learn from our operations and put stress on U.S. operators in ways that we haven’t been accustomed to in many years. And now with a rapid withdrawal, they will not only be learning from their experience in working in close proximity with us but able to exploit other opportunities down the road when we will inevitably be in contested environments with them.
And I think the third party that stands out is a normative one in terms of the erosion of accountability, whether that's looking at the use of chemical weapons in Syria and how that long-standing principle prohibiting the use of chemical weapons in warfare has significantly eroded and the international community's failure to really act to uphold that.

Certainly, the use of conventional weapons even more so in Syria in terms of loss of life has eroded the norms of warfare in terms of targeting hospitals, civilian targets, bakeries—an incredible loss of life—and threats to civilians, and some deep questions in terms of the conduct of our own forces and the partners that we work with in these situations in terms of the reliance on air power, on the reliance on local partners to achieve our local security objectives.

There are good reasons to use these capabilities. But when we consider withdrawal that is rapid, we need to be thoughtful about how we tie off these engagements responsibly and I fear that there is not a careful calculation being made for that in a rapid withdrawal.

Bob Schieffer: You know, in preparing for this panel I was reading some things written by Tony Cordesman, who is just prolific and truly an expert on this part of the world and a lot of other parts of the world as well, and he wrote that— he went so far as to say, and this is his quote, “The president has literally placed the United States in a position where it is losing on all fronts.”

Now, Seth, you told me before we came out here that you had a rather interesting experience being on C-SPAN the other day where you took questions from the audience. But that was not the tenor, apparently, that the people who were calling you had.

Seth G. Jones: Yeah. I have, obviously, written on this subject quite a bit recently and laid out some concerns about what John mentioned earlier—how withdrawal was done and the terms under which it was done. I wrote an opinion piece in Nancy's paper about a week and a half ago on concerns about the terrorism issue with the withdrawal.

But one of the things that struck me in the C-SPAN session, and it's one of the call-in shows—it was a morning hour where I had a discussion for the first 15 or 20 minutes, and then the rest of the series was taking calls from Republicans, Democrats, and then independents.

Now, it's probably not entirely a random sampling but every person that called in—every person that called in was—Republican, Democrat, independent—was supportive of a withdrawal from Syria and wondered categorically why we were there, what our strategic interests were, and why we couldn't spend the money that we were using in Syria—and not just Syria but Afghanistan—at home instead of overseas. So, I mean, in that case, pretty clear domestic support for withdrawing U.S. forces from Syria and at least downsizing in Afghanistan.

Bob Schieffer: Nancy, what do you think the impact of this is going to be for the rest of that region?
Nancy Youssef: Well, I'll start with Syria because, as you know, there are more than 2,000 troops there and the U.S. isn't talking about bringing those troops home. They're talking about placing them in places like Iraq and Kuwait and the neighboring countries and essentially having them parachuted as needed.

So from a military perspective, one of the things you hear at the Pentagon is that brings with it its own risks. When you're parachuting in and not there all the time and you're depending on local partners who – in this case, the Kurds, who would feel abandoned – that increases the risks for the troops, and it reduces your understanding and ability to sort of shape events.

Broadly, I think what you're starting to hear is talk about growing influence for Russia, for Iran, in the absence of a U.S. presence there. Russia obviously has always had influence in Syria, given its relationship, and it has a base there. And of course, Iran has done the same thing. You hear a lot of talk about a land bridge from Iran through the Middle East, that'll be facilitated by the U.S. withdrawal. Now, the counter to that argument is that because they've had a longstanding influence there, maybe they don't – the U.S. presence doesn't affect it as much, right? Because do they really need a land bridge, if you're Iran, to have influence in the region, or in Syria? Arguably they do already, and had it before even the U.S. was there, and likewise with Russia.

The most immediate thing I think you're seeing right now is a region operating where the U.S. isn't the dominant influencing force. And I think we saw this most recently with the strikes that was launched between Israel and Iranian forces in Syria. Where you had Russia sort of making their case, and Iran sort of asserting its influence, and Israel defending itself. And you could feel the absence of U.S. influence there. So when we think broadly in terms of the effect on the region, I think ultimately it's one where the U.S. isn't the leading negotiator in all this, and that you almost go from sort of a unipolar managed Middle East to a multipolar one.

Bob Schieffer: Why? And whoever knows the answer to this question just speak up. Don't wait to be called on. Why did the president do this? Does anybody have any inside information? Does anybody have a thought? What do you think? Jon?

Jon B. Alterman: So my understanding is that the president has been very clear that he wanted to do this. And people in his government were kind of ignoring it and weren't carrying out his actions. And you had the national security advisor announcing in September that we were going to stay in Syria as long as Iran had troops outside of Iran, which is a pretty bold statement, which apparently never represented the president's views. And I think the president became very frustrated that his government was not following his direction. And he said: I'm just going to do it. And it – to me, it highlights a problem, which is the U.S. government is set up to consider different options and consider different perspectives and push things up through a bureaucracy to present a set of options which are then discussed in front of the president, and the president makes a decision.

And to me, the way this Syria announcement was made, it suggests that entire system is broken, and validates the concerns I've heard that the system is broken. That the president doesn't get considered decisions. He doesn't consider various options. His government doesn't follow his directions. And the way it works is the president either issues a tweet or makes a statement and people react to that. But
If he’s not doing it, they’re not reacting. And to me, that creates a whole set of challenges, most importantly for American allies. Because if you want to help the United States, it becomes very hard to figure out where the United States is going and what’s considered helpful.

Seth G. Jones: But, Bob, I got to add two things to this. One is, you know, the Trump administration now has two years under its belt, from January 2017 now to January 2019. And I think it’s worth asking, with two years gone by, what’s sort of the Trump doctrine for foreign policy? And what it – what it is increasingly looking like is a foreign policy that looks a lot like – not isolationism, because I wouldn’t call it isolationist – but it’s much – it’s much more one of what you might call restraint. And that is a foreign policy that minimizes the use of military forces in some areas. And for him, the Middle East and I think South Asia are areas he does not see a strategic interest, at least at this point.

China represents a slightly different situation where I think the president – and you can see it both with the trade wars and the way he speaks about China, is an area where he sees some competition. And so I think in that sense, we see a deployment of military forces into the Asia-Pacific region.

Iran is sort of interesting. The U.S. has pulled out of the nuclear deal. Iran does represent an area of some competition, but it makes the Syria withdrawal almost ironic because by pulling U.S. forces out the way he has and not negotiating what the terms and conditions are, you know, the Iranians now have an ability to move into more vacuums in Syria, particularly now in the areas of the East, than they had in the past. So both the Iranians and the Russians have the ability to move into the vacuum as the U.S. pulls out. But I think this does reflect a Trump policy of what I would call restraint now.

Melissa Dalton: Yeah, no, just to add a couple of points – one, to highlight an important observation that my colleague Alice Friend wrote about a couple weeks ago – which is it really is the president’s call to decide how the military will be deployed around the world. This is civilian control of the military. Where the breakdown occurs, as Jon is highlighting, is in the process of teeing up the options, the risks and tradeoffs that are inherent in that decision making, and how to shore up U.S. strategic interests in the aftermath, and actually a plan for executing the president’s decision. So I think that’s what we’re seeing play out.

The other piece that I would highlight is that this is reflective, I think, not only of the president’s global viewpoint, but it is broader than that. If you look at recent public opinion polling by the Pew Organization, about half of Americans don’t believe that America has achieved its strategic objectives in Afghanistan. It’s also about half that believe that we should be pulling out of Syria. So I think there is an active conversation to be had in the U.S. And perhaps looking forward to future election cycles, in terms of the future course of our foreign policy, the role of the U.S. military in achieving our foreign policy objectives, I would like to see a defense policy in the region that does recalibrate the use of military force and actually right sets the other toolsets at the disposal of the United States: our diplomatic, our economic levers that are incredibly powerful and arguably more in need in this region.
Bob Schieffer: The part that bothers me is I'm beginning to wonder, does anybody know what our policy is. And when we don't know what the policy of the United States is, the rest of the world, I think that puts us in a more dangerous position. In fact, I think that's the most dangerous position one can be in: when people don't know what the United States stands for, what we are prepared to do, when we're prepared to do it, and under what circumstances.

Nancy Youssef: So I think it's a great question, and it really gets at something we haven't experienced. And other panels have talked about this in the past. You'd have a principals meeting, and there would be private deliberations of all the possible options and what the costs were associated with and what would be the best option, and then an announcement would be made: This is how the U.S. is going to proceed going forward. And right now, you have the opposite, where the sort of end state is announced first, and then we were sort of publicly seeing the deliberations happen, right? And so in the case of Syria you'll hear the U.S. is withdrawing in 30 days, or 60 days, or there's not a date, or it's only going to leave when Iran's contained and ISIS is completely defeated.

So for me as a military correspondent, the thing that I turn to is those things that get outside of rhetoric. And so in the case of Syria, there's a document that the Pentagon produces that's called an execution order, and of course there has to be an acronym for it, an EXORD. And that actually spells out the U.S. mission – military mission – in Syria. And so I think when searching for what the policy is, you have to, I think, for those following, get around the rhetoric and try to get those concrete things.

It's why you've heard General Miller in Afghanistan and General Neller, the comandante when he was there, saying we don't have any orders to change anything. What they're turning to is sort of tangible descriptions of the policy because the sort of swirl of public rhetoric has created confusion. And I think for all of you who are astute observers of these topics, I think those are the sort of the anchors you look for, because I think if you keep following the rhetoric, you are basically following an internal deliberation playing out publicly.

Bob Schieffer: Go ahead, Seth.

Seth G. Jones: I was just going to say, the other area where the rhetoric has I think been problematic is statements by some policymakers, including this week, that the – that one of the rationales for withdrawing forces from Syria is that the Islamic State has been defeated or even that the caliphate has been defeated. And I think one has to look very carefully at the evidence that we have.

We put out a report here at CSIS back in November and found that the largest numbers of both Salafi jihadist groups, and that includes the Islamic State, and the largest number of fighters anywhere in the world is still in Syria right now, that the Islamic State has not been defeated, they continue to conduct attacks as we recently saw in Manbij. And, by the way, on the western part of Syria in the Idlib area, we have the largest concentration of al-Qaida-linked fighters anywhere in the globe right now, operating under the group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

So it is disingenuous to argue that a reason we should leave is because we have defeated the Islamic State when the reality on the ground – I think anybody who
has looked at the terrorism picture in Syria would say that while ISIS has lost virtually all the territory it once controlled, it still has large numbers of operatives involved in guerilla attacks, clandestine operations and is in the process of attempting to recreate it. So I think the facts are important rather than just the rhetoric here.

Bob Schieffer: Do you agree with that, Melissa?

Melissa Dalton: Yes. I would agree with that assessment. And I think it’s equally important to think about, you know, the need to sustain capabilities in the region, if not in Syria, then, you know, in the perimeter countries, as Nancy was describing, to address those challenges with our partners. But then also, what is the other side of the equation? How do we get ourselves out of this cycle of perpetually fighting counterterrorism operations for decades? It’s the stabilization piece, it’s those other tools of statecraft that empower local partners to establish local governance on their own terms and in ways that can connect to a broader political process. And that’s the areas that we are continuing to fail to invest in that we really need to up our game.

Bob Schieffer: You know, I thought it was interesting. And you saw it again when Mattis left, when – and I don’t say this to promote my own interview – but when I interviewed Rex Tillerson and I asked him – I asked him two just, you know, very open questions: How would you describe Donald Trump, was the first one. And the other one was, when did your relationship go off the rails? And when I asked him about that, he said I think he – I’m paraphrasing what he said – but he said I think, basically, he just got tired of me telling him he couldn’t do things. He said he would propose things and I would say, you know, if you want me to go up on the Hill and advocate for that and so forth, I can do that, but, Mr. President, you can’t do that, that’s illegal. And he said I think he just got tired of me being the one who kept telling him that.

And when I asked him in the beginning how would he describe the president, he said, well, he doesn’t read, he’s uninformed, he will not take a briefing, and he’s not very interested in much more – in what people have to say to him, which I thought was pretty astonishing. But then, you know, a couple of weeks after that, the Syria thing happens and Mattis leaves. And if you look at what his letter said, it basically said the same – the same thing. And now you’ve got the chief of staff who’s gone. And if you go back and look at some of the things he’s said and what they’re now quoting him, sources are who know him, are saying, it sounds like it all comes down to that. He does not like to be challenged. And when he makes up his mind, that’s the way he sees it and he’s not going to be dissuaded from it.

But I just – I don’t know why, maybe it’s just because no one ever quotes him. But when all of this happens, I keep going back to Martin Van Buren. I mean, you don’t hear many people quote Martin Van Buren. (Laughter.) The fact was he was, you know, he was Andrew Jackson’s vice president and he was a master politician. But he said at one point that government should not be operated based on the excitement of the moment, but on sound and sober second thought. And I think that’s one of the things that may be missing here now. But that’s just my opinion clearly underlined.

Jon B. Alterman: You know, I think what you’re getting at is it feels to me like the president is fairly separated from his government. And maybe that’s natural because the president didn’t come up through government. He hasn’t been engaged in these processes.
But when I read about the way the White House works, there’s a way in which the president is normally deeply engaged and pushes people and pushes things back. But it’s a give and take where the president is totally emmeshed in the machinery of government. And two years in, the president seems to strain against the machinery of government and say: But I think this is what it should be.

But the government doesn’t work that way. The government doesn’t work on big, broad pronouncements. The government works on, OK, so these are the 17 things, and the eight sub-points, and going down, and down, and down, and with an up and down which the president seems rather pointedly divorced from. And that – I think and then the historic question is whether the job of being president has changed such that we’re going to have more presidents who haven’t come out of government whose approach is that, or whether this is just an anomalous president. And it’s, frankly, too early to tell.

Seth G. Jones: But one thing we’re missing – and I think when we look at historical administrations that take momentous steps – whether it’s introducing U.S. forces or aid packages, the way we had after World War II when Truman introduces the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, or any other periods like that in American history, even when we’re withdrawing, is the president uses venues, whether it’s national television or major speeches, to outline the vision and the broader doctrine that is behind his decisions to put – what we lack right now is we have to sort of guess what restraint looks like, and what a policy of restraint looks like.

What we don’t have is a clearly articulated policy where we can – we don’t have to agree with it – but we understand why he believes we’re withdrawing – that we should withdraw from Syria and downsize in Afghanistan. And we understand the vision, we understand the doctrine, and that these are steps that flow logically from that. That, we’re missing right now, and I think that we’ve seen in, I think, a number of past presidents that have had to make these momentous decisions.

Jon B. Alterman: But they’ve often had a team around them –

Bob Schieffer: Nancy wanted to say one thing.

Nancy Youssef: I’m just going to offer a contrarian view, just for the purposes of discussion and also because it’s something you hear from sources around the topic of Syria. When the United States entered Syria in 2014, the policymakers then never answered the question of, what would the U.S. exit look like?

Bob Schieffer: That’s true.

Nancy Youssef: They never – right. They never answered it. Either – and it was clear from the beginning it was going to go one of two ways. Either the U.S. would in some way abandon the Kurds or it would be there in perpetuity. This was something that came up under the Obama administration and again under the Trump administration. And this president was clear that he wanted to get out of Syria. He announced it as far back as April of last year. And I think one of the takeaways – and, again, this is just a contrarian view that you hear – is that one of the responsibilities of the military and policymakers that put forward these ideas is to answer the question of how to get out. Because I think the argument you hear is by
not doing so, you leave the strategy of Syria vulnerable to a president who has said: I want out.

And so – and, again, this is – I’m not sharing a political view. I really just want to get it – I want to just sort of challenge how we think about these issues. Because you heard from the viewers on CSPAN and others the exhaustion with these wars. And I think part of it is that there’s been a failure to really answer how these conflicts end, what a resolution look like, what does an end state look like? The open-endedness of both Syria and Afghanistan, arguably, have left both strategies vulnerable.

Bob Schieffer: I think that’s – those are very good points. Jon –

Jon B. Alterman: I’m not arguing with you the president’s prerogative, or even – you know, you can argue about the justice of being in Syria, pulling out of Syria. You can argue that. I think the president is not well-served by not having – not surrounding himself with trusted advisors who understand the levers of government and can lash him into the government. And I think as a consequence he feels more constrained, and the government either ignores him – and I think we have a lot of evidence of the government sometimes ignoring him – or not understanding where he’s trying to go.

And it seems to me there is that ring of advisors – and it’s partly the chief of staff but it’s others – who have – I mean, the Michael Deavers and the Jim Bakers, and the other people who have been key to making administrations work – and this administration doesn’t have somebody like that. You could say it’s Jared Kushner, but frankly Jared Kushner doesn’t understand enough about the way government works to play that role effectively.

Bob Schieffer: Well, you know, I have never thought trying to – and I spent a lot of years– I’ve spent 15 years covering Congress and I was up on Capitol Hill, and in the offices where the congressmen – and they would all do it just so they could make the extra money – where they would make their wife the chief of staff, you know, it never worked. It never worked because the staff can’t go to the guy’s wife and say, he’s really screwed up here; we’ve got to get this straightened out. And it just doesn’t work, and I don’t see that as a great strength.

I mean, the man’s welcome to have who he wants on his staff. That’s one of his prerogatives as president. But bringing the kids in – I mean, it’s not the corner store, you know. (Laughter.) It’s a little different than that. I mean, I always – one of the questions I always ask people is – you know, you hear so many people who say if they – you know, down in Texas where I come from they pronounce it a “bidness,” not a business. But they say, you know, if they’d run it – run the government like a “bidness,” everything would be fine. Well, it’s not a business and it won’t be fine, and others have tried that and it never – it never quite works out. But I think we ought to – before we go to questions from the audience, ought to talk a little bit more about Afghanistan.

Bob Schieffer: Melissa, how is Afghanistan different from Syria, or is it?

Melissa Dalton: Yeah. No, I mean, I think with Afghanistan it’s a much longer commitment that the United States has made there. It’s with NATO and a broader coalition. It’s linked to
9/11 in terms of our immediate response and the aftermath of that and the Article 5 NATO invocation to respond to that.

So there’s a lot of political/strategic/emotional baggage that I think is subscribed to the Afghanistan question, and then there are the concrete realities of here we are 17 years and the Taliban still presents a pretty significant threat to the stability of Afghanistan, still looming questions in terms of where political negotiations are headed with the Taliban, the resiliency of Afghan governance and their security structures if the U.S. begins a gradual withdrawal.

But, again, we have been there for 17 years. We have done counterterrorism lite. We have done counterinsurgency. We’ve gone back to more of a CT-enabling model. What really works, I think, is – and worthy of review, the administration actually did a significant review in the first year of the administration. Released a pretty good South Asia strategy in 2017 that articulated a policy position on Afghanistan and in the context of the broader region, addressing some of the challenges with Pakistan as well.

And I think the added challenge for this administration is, given how much emphasis they have placed on strategic competition with Russia and China, we also have to think about the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the leverage that that brings in South and Central Asia through that lens as China is building “One Belt, One Road,” Russia has economic interests in Afghanistan, Iran has interests in Afghanistan. And Afghanistan has actually been a potential opportunity to bring these convergence of interests together in prior eras of our experience in Afghanistan. But how all of this is strategically knit together I think are looming questions for this administration.

Bob Schieffer: Are we safer now than we were two years ago? Are we safer because we’ve been in Afghanistan all that time, or not?

Melissa Dalton: Seth can get it.

Seth G. Jones: Are we – well, look, I think what we don’t have at the moment is terrorist organizations, particularly al-Qaida, plotting significant attacks directed either at the U.S. homeland or at Western interests – let’s say Europe – from Afghan territory right now. Al-Qaida exists in its local affiliate, which we call al-Qaida in the Indian subcontinent. But al-Qaida’s core has been decimated pretty badly. I mean, the last major attack in the United States or plot tied to Afghanistan was 2009. It was the Najibullah Zazi plot, which would have been three suicide bombers on New York City subway cars. He conducted training with al-Qaida in Afghanistan. But that was 10 years ago now. So since then we’ve seen very little in the sense of external plotting from that country, and that’s to a great extent U.S. operations on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border.

Bob Schieffer: Nancy?

Nancy Youssef: Well, the only thing I would say is the challenge of Afghanistan is how you withdraw could lead to that state becoming vulnerable to a place for jihadists to set up camp. And so the reason I think you’re seeing the peace talks go the way they are and with such a focus on some sort of U.S. counterterrorism presence is a recognition by all sides, including the Taliban, that a precipitous withdrawal and
collapse of the state would present problems for everybody involved. And so to
your question is the U.S. safer, it’s not more – it hasn’t been more endangered. And
the way the U.S. withdraws will determine whether that remains the case.

Bob Schieffer: Jon, do you want to – what do you think overall?

Jon B. Alterman: Look, I – first, in my successful turf battle, I’ve managed to have my turf end at the
eastern border of Iran, so Afghanistan’s not my AOR. (Laughter.) But, you know, I
the point that Melissa was making earlier is important. And let me put a
different spin. It’s not just about our sort of nonmilitary instruments. I think we
have to have a national discussion about what “good enough” looks like. We have
had pretty high ambitions for how we can transform societies and the foundation of
that has been Germany and Japan after World War II. We’ve had a lot of pretty
mixed experiences in the decades since. Vietnam seems to have done very well
despite us.

But I think as a country, we have to have a much more open discussion about how
good “good enough” is and how much we’re willing to commit toward these things
because I think we end up expecting too much, expecting more than we’re willing
to invest. I mean, we got all caught up and then we start saying, oh, it’s a failure.
We can’t – we can want everything to work out, but as a country, what are we really
willing to invest? And I feel like we haven’t had a serious discussion about that for
decades.

Bob Schieffer: Do you all believe that the United States must remain engaged around the world? I
mean, not be the world’s policemen, but –

Jon B. Alterman: Yeah.

Bob Schieffer: – we can’t – and sometimes – and I don’t understand Trump’s strategy, but
sometimes it seems to me is what he wants to do is create this enormous military,
but keep it here in the United States.

Melissa Dalton: With a wall.

Bob Schieffer: Behind a wall. (Laughter.)

Jon B. Alterman: Look, I – and to me, the great force multiplier of the United States and the genius of
the post-war order has been a lot of countries have wanted to help us.

Seth G. Jones: I think the clearest, Bob, the clearest strategic document to come out of the
administration was the one overseen by Secretary Mattis, it was the National
Defense Strategy. And that National Defense Strategy outlined U.S. interests in
terms of competition with the Russians, the Chinese, the North Koreans and the
Iranians. That’s the closest we’ve had. But obviously, Secretary Mattis is not in the
administration anymore.

But I think what it – what it highlights, if that document is close to being accurate, is
that for the U.S. to move out and to not engage in some areas – I’m not talking about
large numbers of military forces – but not to engage, it means somebody else will.
And if we’re not careful, we’re not going to have partners there that have similar
values, they’re going to be competitors. And so I think that’s where this becomes important, because if it’s not us there, then who’s there? And is that in our interest?

Bob Schieffer: That’s a very good place to take a pause here and take some questions.

Who has one?

Right there. Right here, behind the white hat, I think somebody – yeah, here we go.

Tell us who you are and (inaudible).

Q: Thank you so much. This is Mohammed Shafiq (ph). I’m an Afghan and I’m – (inaudible).

Thank you. So I would like to quickly say that the situation in Afghanistan or the relationship between Afghanistan and the United States is different from Iraq and Syria and elsewhere, because we do have a strategic partnership, we do have a bilateral security agreement and we do have a status of forces agreement with the United States, while in Syria and Iraq it’s not the case. So when we talk about withdrawal from Afghanistan, I think it should be based on negotiations and deals between the partners, as well as based on a settlement.

So my quick question will be, you know, I know that there is a common saying that it’s easy to go to Afghanistan, but hard to get out of Afghanistan. What will be the alternative in case of any withdrawal or partial withdrawal? What will be the alternative of the United States presence in Afghanistan? For sure in and Syria and other countries, I know it’s Iran and Russia. Thank you.

Bob Schieffer: Who’d like to answer that? We’ve got it. OK. Who’d like to address that?

Seth G. Jones: Just to be clear, what would be the alternative to U.S. pulling out? Was that –

Bob Schieffer: I believe that’s your question, right?

Seth G. Jones: I think, you know, one alternative is to at least – and one, obviously, issue being discussed right now is to keep at least a limited counterterrorism presence there that’s 7,000 or under and that focuses predominately on groups that threaten U.S. interests: Islamic State, Khorasan, al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent; maybe Lashkar-e-Taiba, the group involved in the Mumbai attacks.

The challenge with that, though, is if that allows the Taliban to advance in the country, in rural areas, then you’re creating a situation where there’s some short-term steps to target terrorist groups, but you’ve got a much bigger long-term problem because the main insurgent group is gaining territory and we know historically has allowed some of these groups to operate in it.

By the way, one of the challenges that I’ve had with the way the Afghanistan announcement came out recently was I find it deeply counterproductive in announcing a downsizing of American forces at the very same time that we’re trying to negotiate a settlement where the message the Taliban almost certainly will get is, well, why do we reach a deal now if we can assess you guys are leaving. That’s any bargaining 101: You talk now, but you won’t reach an agreement
because your odds are going to get better every year down the road because the U.S. presence declines. So I think from that perspective, how it was done was – I wouldn’t have necessarily done it that way.


Q: Well, first of all, I’d like to commend Jon for the socks he’s wearing today. They’re quite attractive.

Bob Schieffer: Well, you know, this is TCU. I’ve got them on, too. (Cross talk.)

Q: The fundamental question I want to ask is, we’ve been having a debate since the president announced the withdrawal that ISIS isn’t defeated in Syria. Tell me when ISIS – what are the metrics you would have used for the defeat of ISIS? And more importantly, how long would it have taken us to achieve those metrics – particularly with regards to the ideology?

Bob Schieffer: Nancy, why don’t you talk about that? You’ve been over there. You’ve spent a lot of time on those battlefields.

Nancy Youssef: So those metrics weren’t spelled out explicitly when the U.S. intervened. It was at most to defeat the physical caliphate, that state where they had their own land, taxes, government and everything else. I think an argument that could be made for what a defeat would look like would be the idea of eliminating is sort of Pollyannaish perhaps. And so arguably the best way is to have a place where the Islamic State is one that can be sufficiently addressed by local security forces, by the U.S. in terms of protecting its own security, such that it’s a mitigated threat.

I mean, you know, the comparison I hear is sort of to be police in a community. A police department doesn’t get rid of crime, but an effective police department finds a way to be able to manage the threat to its community. And I think it’s an interesting analogy that is applicable when you think about the ISIS threat. So that would be one that I would offer.

Bob Schieffer: Does anybody here think that ISIS has been defeated?

Seth G. Jones: No.

Jon B. Alterman: I don’t think you can defeat ISIS any more than the war on poverty can defeat poverty, any more than the war on drugs can defeat drugs, right? So I think it’s the wrong metaphor. It’s the wrong objective. Which isn’t to say that we don’t have interests. But, you know, what strikes me about ISIS – and I think we talked about this in a previous Schieffer series – it morphs, and it will find any opening it can to act, whether it’s onesies and twosies in Europe, whether it’s terrorist events in Manbij or somewhere else. And when you set the bar so low for their success, which is they can slide a suicide bomber one place or some guy with a knife one place in Europe and that gets them another year of success, then they keep winning and we keep losing even if we’re 99 percent effective. Why set up odds that way?

Bob Schieffer: That’s very interesting.

Well, let’s have a lady. A woman. (Laughter.)
Melissa Dalton: There’s one. There’s one.

Jon B. Alterman: There’s a woman in the back.

Seth G. Jones: There’s one right here.

Bob Schieffer: Where are we? OK, right here.

Q: Hi. My question is, I tend to agree with unpopular opinion that with the withdrawal from Syria I don’t think our job is to do the safekeeping for Syria. And then, for Afghanistan, we’ve been there for 17 years. But the speaker in the middle, sir, he had a question that if the space is not occupied by the United States, then who will move in? So my question to the panel is, so what do you think of Russia getting possibly regional supremacy in the area? And what will be the role of the United States?

Bob Schieffer: And do I understand your question: the recent events, have they benefitted Russia? Is that –

Q: Well –

Bob Schieffer: Is that basically what you’re asking?

Q: No, I think my point is there is some logic in terms of saving resources for the United States. But I think I want to pursue his question that, OK, so if the U.S. withdraw(s) from those regions – I mean from those areas, somebody more than likely will go in. And from what I see, Russia has a very good stronghold in that region.

Bob Schieffer: OK.

Q: And I want to ask the opinions of the panel.

Bob Schieffer: I understand. Have at it, panel. Who wants to answer that?

Seth G. Jones: OK, I guess I’ll start since it was my question.

I mean, in – this is probably slightly less of an issue in Afghanistan and more right now in Syria. I think what we’re seeing is a – is a more active Russia in Syria. It’s getting itself involved in the refugee return discussions. It’s now got power-projection capabilities that it didn’t have before 2015. It’s got access and more ships at Tartus. It’s got more fighter jets and bombers in and around Latakia. So it’s the one, as we’ve discussed earlier, that’s in part been discussing with Iranians on one side and Israelis on the other in trying to mediate that dispute and keep the conflict to a limited level.

On a recent trip, Jon and I were in Lebanon. I had a senior Lebanese official tell me that the Russians were now, you know, a major power in the Middle East in ways that have outstripped the U.S. presence. So that’s the downside of leaving, is the Russians become a more active military power in the region and a more important diplomatic and intelligence power in the region.
Jon B. Alterman: Thirty seconds.

I think the Russians always have much lower ambitions than the United States. The U.S. is trying to create systems and processes and, you know, create dynamics and all those things. And the Russians, oftentimes they'll prop something up, they'll try to eliminate a group. They're not looking to do what the U.S. does. And I— you know, I'm constantly struck that in Syria you had a three-country coalition beat a 65-country coalition which the U.S. helped lead, and it was partly because they were looking to do so much less.

Melissa Dalton: Yeah. And I think just to build upon Jon's point, I think it's also important to moderate our expectations of what Russia can do, whether it's in Syria or more broadly in the region, because of their own capacity issues, their own political and economic constraints at home, that can serve as a check. That said, I think it is concerning to the United States strategically, politically, and certainly wearing my defense hat in terms of us, the United States, having to second guess our ability to operate in the region, to rely upon certain allies and partners in the ways that I think we have grown quite comfortable and maybe complacent about over the last several decades, that will require some reinvigoration.

Bob Schieffer: I'm very sorry, but this is going to have— that's going to have to be— well, we'll take one more question. Do you have a question?

Q: Yes.

Bob Schieffer: Front row.

Jon B. Alterman: Well, you have to wait a microphone.

Bob Schieffer: Here comes the mic.

Jon B. Alterman: You still have to wait for a microphone.

Bob Schieffer: Hold off. And this definitely has to be the last question because some of our panelists have other obligations.

Q: How safe do you think the Kurds will be once we leave, with Erdogan not— how much do you trust what Erdogan is saying?

Bob Schieffer: I think that's a great question, because it's the one thing that hasn't come up here. Who'd like to address that?

Nancy Youssef: Well, so the Kurds right now I think will start trying to negotiate for their own security. They'll start talking to the Assad regime. The advantage that they have is for all the talk of the Turks moving into Syria and taking— going all the way down to the MERV, logistically it would be very hard for them to move roughly 200 miles down and carry out the kinds of operations that they've promised the U.S. that they
could do. I mean, they’ve had problems getting over the border, just logistically. And I think there has been a real effort to mitigate, as much as it can, the United States has, the risk to the Kurds. It’s why you’re hearing that the United States will continue to do strikes as necessary. It’s why the French will still be there. It’s why there’s even talk of having U.S. forces go back and forth into Iraq. That there’s some effort to try to mitigate that risk. And I also think the Kurds are trying to reach their own deals with forces on the ground.

And so the short answer is I don’t know. I do think that there’s a serious effort being made, though, to contain the aspirations of those who in Turkey who want to use this as an opportunity to move in and take out what they see as a terrorist threat. I just – I just think – but it’s sort of an ongoing issue in terms of how that’s going to resolve itself. In part, because I think Turkey’s still working out what it’s going to do. The U.S. is working out what it can do to support. And the Kurds are still trying to work out what agreements they can make on the ground to address the possible Turks.

Bob Schieffer: And with that, I’d say thanks to all of you on behalf of TCU and CSIS. Really appreciate your coming. (Applause.)

(END)