

NWX-WOODROW WILSON CENTER

Moderator: Drew Sample
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Drew Sample: Thank you. This is Drew Sample with the Woodrow Wilson Center. I just wanted to welcome everyone to our media briefing today ahead of the Ashraf Ghani visit to Washington DC next week.

We have here Michael Kugelin a Senior Associate for South Asia at the Woodrow Wilson Center and Robert Hathaway former Director of the Asia program at the Wilson Center now a public policy scholar here at the Wilson Center.

The two of them are here on hand to answer your questions ahead of the visit. So I think with that we - let's just go ahead and start taking some questions.

So (George) you chimed in early. Would you like to start with the first question?

(George): To what degree are they going to be talking with what degree is - are troop levels going to be at the top of the agenda and if you could give us an overall characterization of the relationship between the two Presidents?

Michael Kugelman: I can - this is Michael Kugelman. I can go ahead and start. I think that US Afghan relations are experiencing a seachange from how they had been during the era of Hamid Karzai.

The US Afghan relationship started out very well when Karzai first came to power but the last few years of Karzai's era were marked by all kinds of dysfunction in their relationship to the point that it became personalized. And it seemed like Obama and Karzai simply didn't like each other.

So I think that, you know, everyone assumed that the only way to go the only way to go with this relationship is up. And I think things are looking very good now.

Right after Ghani took office as President he immediately signed the Bilateral Security Agreement with Washington which allowed US troops to remain there this year.

He also lifted a ban that had been put in place by Karzai on night raids. These are very controversial in Afghanistan but US military officials regard them as a very effective counterinsurgency tactic so already Ghani has made a number

of decisions that have been very well received in Washington. So I think that the relationship is in very good shape.

Very briefly to answer your other question about troop levels I think that the true drawdown question will be the top agenda point.

And I actually think that President Obama could well make the decision that many have anticipated over the last few weeks that he will essentially announce that the current troop levels in Afghanistan today almost 10,000 will in fact be maintained next year.

Originally he has said that they would be brought down to about 5500. I actually think he may well decide to make that decision.

Robert Hathaway: It's - this is Robert Hathaway. Everybody hear me okay?

Drew Sample: Yes.

Robert Hathaway: Yes. I entirely concur with Michael Kugelman. I think his use of the word seachange to describe the relation the official relationship and also the personal chemistry between the two top leaders since last summer is exactly the right term.

I think Obama has or the administration has very clearly indicated that it is prepared to slow down the earlier timetable for the drawdown of US troops.

So I actually think that will not be a major source of discussion between the two leaders next week simply because there won't be anything to discuss. They'll be agreement between the two on the usefulness of this.

My guess is that in addition to talking about the timetable for the drawdown they'll be a lot of talk about the level of US aid, the extent particularly post-2016 of US financial support.

Now Ghani of course understands that Obama cannot make any commitments that would bind his successor in terms of aid levels.

But I think nonetheless that Ghani will want to get as definitive and as firm an expression from Obama as possible of the need and the advisability for a very generous aid package.

I also think that you'll find the two leaders talking about two other things. So one thing they'll be talking about is Afghanistan's need for private investment.

Ghani spent decades as a development economist for the World Bank. He wrote a book about how to rescue failed and failing states.

He has a deep professional understanding about what needs to be done to turn Afghanistan particularly the economy around.

And I think he fundamentally believes that one of the most important things will be a private money foreign investment.

So they will I'm sure they'll be considerable discussion about how to promote investment from US business people as well as from other sources.

The other thing I think they'll spend a lot of time talking about is the would be peace process between Kabul and the Taliban.

And in this context I think Washington the Obama administration believes that it should not be and cannot be a direct party to these talks but that it can play a useful and indeed perhaps even a crucial role in continuing to persuade and pressure the Pakistanis that - for their continued support for this process and for their continued pressure on the Taliban to negotiate in good faith.

So I think all of these things will be on the agenda for next week. But in terms of actual time spent I think they'll be less time spent on timetable for US military drawdown then on some of these other topics.

(George): Okay.

Drew Sample: (Deb) do you have any questions for us?

(Deb): Yes. Do you all share the rosy forecast that we've been here from the defense officials about the ANSF about their capabilities?

And what do you guys think in terms of the size of the ANSF going forward? I think the size of the force is linked pretty closely to the donor pledges.

And I'm wondering what you can forecast on that front? And then secondly what kind of a reception do you think he'll get when he speaks to Congress?

Michael Kugelman: This is Michael Kugelman. I think on the question of the ANSF the Afghan forces have made tremendous improvements in capacity over the last few years.

However it's really starting from such a low base that it's going to take a long time before it's in a position to be 100% capable of fighting what is still a very strong insurgency.

I would argue that they are very specific areas where there are continued deficiencies within the forces.

And this includes things like intelligence collection, air cover, and I think that part of the argument for having residual US troops is to help where it can to try to fill those gaps.

But I think that there are still considerable incapacities and considerable challenges that the Afghan forces fight.

And really taking it down to a more fundamental level, you know, forget about war fighting capacities this is a force that still suffers from very high levels of drug abuse, desertions, illiteracy still has very high rates within the force.

And US and other international donors have tried to address these problems for a number of years. And as I understand it there have been some improvements but still these are still major areas.

I think that if you want to look at these forces as those that, you know, suffer from major problems on the fundamental levels that's a really big deal and that's something to be concerned about.

In terms of his in terms of the reception Ghani will get on Capitol Hill and I think that you will not see a bigger contrast from the reception he will get and the reception that Benjamin Netanyahu got when he was in Washington and gave his address a few weeks back.

I think that he will probably Ghani will probably receive bipartisan support. I imagine the address regardless of what he says -- and I don't think they'll be too much controversy in what he says -- will be received quite positively by everyone in attendance.

(Deb): Okay. And on the overall size of the ANSF have you guys thought about that? I think...

Robert Hathaway: I - this is Robert Hathaway. I think it is unsustainable for the reasons which Michael already touched upon and that is or maybe you did in your question.

Financially the Afghanistan can simply not afford is large security apparatus as is planned for. Moreover and connected to that I think of the design of particularly the Army has been not very well thought out.

The United States and its NATO allies but with the Americans in the lead have created an army that looks in large measure like the US Army.

As a consequence the Afghans believe that they have to have helicopter gunships, they've got to have all the other accoutrements of a modern 21st-century army. They can't afford it. Moreover there enemies don't have such capabilities.

And I think inevitably both because of fiscal pressures and because of the nature of the warfare in Afghanistan we are going to see a few years down the road a smaller, leaner sleeker Afghan army.

Whether or not it will be a more effective army I think remains to be seen but it's going to be a very, very tough slog ahead.

And I'm not sure that we have done we being the United States have done the Afghans a favor in trying to in so many respects replicate U.S. Army in the Afghan army.

(Deb): Do you think that they donor - I'm sorry to dominate here. Do you think that the donor nations are willing to continue to fund the ANSF?

Robert Hathaway: Well that's the \$64,000 question, isn't it? I think in one way you can view the future as an endurance contest between on the one hand the Taliban and on the other hand the US taxpayer and members of Congress.

Clearly it seems that the signs are that no one is eager no one in the United States is eager to draw what already has become America's longest war out even longer than need be.

Michael's correct as well about the reception that Ghani will receive on Congress in Congress. So neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are eager to cut and run.

But I think both parties in the American Congress are looking for ways to declare victory and continue to dramatically cut back US expenditures including those and particularly those since they are such a large percentage of the total particularly those going to the ANSF.

(Deb): Okay thank you.

Drew Sample: Oh sorry.

(George): Let me ask oh I'm sorry go on.

(Deb): Go ahead.

Michael Kugelman: Sorry. Just very briefly to pick up on what Bob had said. I think that there is an increasing realization that the United States is going to need to provide more military resources than previously expected to deal with this ISIS issue.

And I think that there is a concern or should I say a desire on the part of the US government to be careful and to try to strike a balance in terms of how much assistance, how much aid, how much money it really wants to get out there because I think there's a realization that the US is going to be dealing with this ISIS issue for quite some time.

And including perhaps even to a lesser extent in the Middle East in Afghanistan I think that there is some rising concern within the US military and the US government that ISIS is trying to raise its profile its influence in the Afghanistan Pakistan region. And that may play into this calculus as well.

(Deb): Okay.

(George): This is (George) again. And I just wanted to return for a second both what you said about Congress and the troop level.

Is Senator McCain an outlier in that he would like Ghani to really press the President for higher American troop levels there and would like to hear that in the speech? Is that not likely to happen and is McCain basically only speaking for himself?

Robert Hathaway: It's Bob Hathaway. McCain isn't speaking for himself but he certainly does not speak for all members of his party.

Many of whom continue to worry about the impact of a growing US defense budget on our fiscal well-being.

So while there is a very vocal portion of the Republican Party that is pushing has pushed Obama and will push and has pushed Ghani for a maximum US military assistance and for a very large Afghan army the Republican Party doesn't speak as one on this. And I think generally speaking the Democratic Party finds itself pretty close to where Obama is.

Go back to 2008 on the presidential campaign here. Obama was quite explicit in identifying the war in Afghanistan as the good war as opposed to the bad war in Iraq.

So Obama's not going to simply want to cut and run either. And I think we've seen this just in the last week or so when we've seen the hits from the administration that it is prepared to slow down the pace of the US withdrawal.

But I think there's going to be with all the other competing calls on the US defense budget and Michael mentioned something the rebalance to Asia is still under resourced.

And they'll be - I mean Obama administration considers the pivot to Asia one of its signature foreign policy accomplishments so far last six plus years.

So it's certainly not going to want to short change that in order to continue to pour resources into Afghanistan beyond sort of the minimum necessary.

And this will go back get back I think to this what I referred to earlier as this endurance contest between US taxpayers on one hand and the Taliban on the other.

I mean the best solution for everybody if it can be done and it's a big if the best solution for all parties is a negotiated settlement because I think everybody can accept the fact that there is no military solution. So absent a negotiated political settlement the - the likelihood is for continued fighting.

(George): Okay. One other quick follow on something that was said earlier it was mentioned that the chemistry between the two leaders is good.

Is this - are we - do we have any signs of that? Is it mostly just relief that you have somebody less mercurial than Karzai, somebody less combative or do the two men just have they hit it off on whatever interactions they've had?

Robert Hathaway: Well one of their interactions is that while George W. Bush had weekly videoconferences with Karzai for much of his presidency there was virtually no personal interaction between Obama and Karzai in Karzai's last years. Obama and Ghani have resumed the practice of periodic videoconferencing. I think that's one sign.

A second sign is the one that I've already mentioned the broad hints from the administration that it is going to slow down the earlier timetable on withdrawal.

A third indication I think is Obama's request for the coming fiscal year for economic assistance to Afghanistan.

This is on top of the military assistance which is larger than what was being programmed for fiscal 2015.

And at the time of the release of the President's 2016 budget administration specifically referenced Ghani's economic reform efforts and an American desire and administration desire to assist those efforts through a somewhat larger more generous portion of US aid.

Michael Kugelman: And I would just jump in this is Michael that we need to be careful we need to be cautious about how we read issues of personal chemistry between leaders.

I mean let's not forget that when Karzai first came to power as President he was essentially he was somebody that can seemingly do no wrong in Washington's eyes.

You know, George W. Bush called him a hero because of the role he had played with international troops and when we entered Afghanistan in 2001.

He apparently impressed many people with his charm, his manners that type of thing. But we see where things went after that.

Ghani of course for the reasons we've already laid out it clearly seems like someone that the US do business with. And I think that's true.

But, you know, I think it's important to understand that things could change down the road. But for now I think it's - there's a reason for hope that these are two leaders that'll get along or at least for the time that Obama is still President.

And but at the end of the day, you know, whoever who we all knew that before the Afghan election whoever became Afghanistan's new leader would be an improvement over the Karzai era just because things had gotten so bad

and so dysfunctional to the point that top US officials including Vice President Biden were actually getting into shouting matches with Hamid Karzai. And we're a long way from that now for the better.

Robert Hathaway: The difference in the two men I think can be summarized in Karzai was very much the traditional tribal chieftain.

Ghani is a technocrat. (Kazi) I'm sorry Karzai reflected and sustained a culture of cronyism which ultimately proved disastrous for good governance.

Ghani has made as a center point of his governance strategy anticorruption. We cannot overemphasize the severity of corruption in Afghanistan.

Last year Transparency International ranked Afghanistan as the third most corrupt country in the world only behind Somalia and North Korea.

So the personal chemistry is there but I think also the White House sees very fundamental different not only in the policies put the temperaments, and the approaches and the styles of the two Afghan Presidents.

Drew Sample: Thanks Bob. I want to give a couple other people some opportunities to ask questions as well. Is David Brunnstrom out there or one of his colleagues from Reuters?

(Deb): If not I have another one.

Drew Sample: Okay. Go ahead (Deb).

(Deb): Okay. Well we just talked about the relationship between Obama and Ghani. Let's talk about the relationship between Ghani and Abdullah?

Robert Hathaway: This is Bob Hathaway again. Someone last year described the new unity government in Kabul as a government stuck together with chewing gum.

There was a great deal of personal animosity between the two men during and in the aftermath of the two elections last year.

The new government promised to create a cabinet within I think the period was 75 days. And that 70 day five day period expired in early November. Here we are four plus months later and they still don't have a fully functioning cabinet.

The principal reason for that is the continued jockeying for patronage and for positions by supporters of Ghani, and Abdullah and others as well. So it's not simply a contest between these two senior leaders.

I think we have to guess that there is a lot of friction and a lot of sharp elbows behind the scenes. But I think we also need to acknowledge that for the most part their public relationship has been very proper and even cordial.

And certainly Abdullah has been very supportive of general Ghani approach including in particular the idea of trying to sit down at the negotiating table with the Taliban.

So there's lots - there's good reason to wonder how long term it is. But by the same token if these two men and their followers can work together than the prospects of this being a reasonably successful experiment in nation building and in governance so it would be hugely enhanced.

So from the standpoint of simply American interests one has to hope that they can find a way for their own interests for their own reasons to work together.

Michael Kugelman: Yes. This is Michael again. There is very important symbolism in the fact that Abdullah is accompanying President Ghani to Washington. They're coming to DC together. And I think that's meant to make a powerful statement and which it does.

You know, Bob's point about this national unity government and its inability to form a cabinet is really important for broader reasons.

Let's remember that, you know, if you have a ministry that's not full it's very hard to develop coordinated incoherent policies. And it makes it more difficult to achieve progress on the huge challenges that Afghanistan faces.

And I think that as a result of that Afghans common Afghans patients could quickly wear thin with their government which, you know, as we all remember is not a government that they elected.

Last year Afghans braved all types of threats from the Taliban to vote for what they thought would be a single leader not for a national unity government arrangement that emerged from a US brokered negotiation to resolve an election stalemate.

(Deb): Okay.

Drew Sample: Do we have any other questions?

(George): No. All set.

Drew Sample: No. All right well...

(George): This has been very helpful by the way. Thank you for doing this.

Drew Sample: Great. Thank you (George). I'm glad that it's helpful for you. Did (Michael) did you have any final comments? Anything you...

Michael Kugelman: No. I'm good.

Drew Sample: ...didn't cover?

Michael Kugelman: I'm all set.

(Deb): Okay.

Robert Hathaway: This is Bob Hathaway. Let me simply in two sentences underscore one point we haven't talked about. China and the United States are bumping heads around the world.

To a surprising degree the Chinese identify their interests in Afghanistan very similarly to the way the United States does.

So here's an opportunity for China and the United States to actually work together in a way that would advance their individual interests but also help to take some of the rough edges off what well under the best of circumstances be a very contentious if not adversarial relationship.

Similarly the US and Iran there's a basis for cooperation between Iran and Washington on Afghanistan as well that will not overshadow all of the difficulties of that bilateral relationship.

But here is another opportunity where with two traditional adversaries China and Iran the United States might actually find ways to collaborate.

Drew Sample: Interesting. All right well if that's it I want to thank everyone for joining - today's briefing. And we'll have audio recording available in a couple of hours.

And we'll have a transcript available of the whole call about four, 5:00 PM tomorrow that I will distribute to everyone as well.

Any other questions feel free to let me...

(Deb): Okay. Thanks guys.

(Deb): Thanks.

Man: Thank you.

(Deb): Okay.

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