

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: The American War in Afghanistan

featuring
Carter Malkasian

interviewed by
Annie Henderson and Reema Saleh

March 7, 2022
Full Transcript

Reema Saleh: Hi. This is Reema, and you're listening to the University of Chicago Public Policy Podcast.

Reema Saleh: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world, and the people, societies, and policy issues it affects. In this series, you'll hear from experts and practitioners who conduct research, implement programs, and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P, in collaboration with The Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Annie Henderson: What should we learn from the aftermath of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, and what decisions could've brought a better outcome? The fall of Kabul to the Taliban marked the end of America's longest war in history, with the former Afghan government being able to retain control of the country. In this episode, we speak with Carter Malkasian, a historian and author of *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*. It provides a comprehensive history of U.S. intervention, conflict, and withdrawal over the course of the war.

Carter Malkasian: Hi. I'm Carter Malkasian. I like to think of myself as a historian. I am a professor at The Naval Postgraduate School right now. I've spent lots of time in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and that's what I wrote a book on, and I try to speak Pashto here and there, and try to study Afghanistan, study other historical topics. I think that covers me pretty well.

Annie Henderson: To start our conversation, the war in Afghanistan spanned across four U.S. presidents. Can you give us a brief history of how the U.S. approach to Afghanistan has shifted over the past 20 years?

Carter Malkasian: Yeah, that's no problem. If you want to talk about our approach in broad strategy, we started out in 2001, after Osama bin Laden attacked the United States, wanting to go into Afghanistan, capture him, destroy Al Qaeda, and topple the Taliban movement that was associated with Al Qaeda, but we often judged as being one in the same. In reality, they weren't, but we kind of thought that at the time. But we went in with just a small number of troops, at that time. By the beginning of 2002, there was still fewer than 8,000 U.S. troops in the country.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Carter Malkasian: After we removed the Taliban, then we had to help establish a new government in Afghanistan. That government ends up being run by Hamid Karzai. Our idea is, at that time, we want to continue to maintain pressure against terrorist groups. We're also going to help build a democracy. During these first years, we kept a small number of troops in the country. We tried to do a few things with helping democracy, and slowly, we started doing a little bit more to help with nation-building, and we did things to help with women's rights.

Carter Malkasian: We didn't want to have too large of a footprint, because we thought that wouldn't be sustainable, and we were overconfident, and thought the Taliban had been totally defeated and weren't going to come back.

Carter Malkasian: This starts to change in 2006. The Taliban had reorganized by then, and fighting was breaking out throughout large parts of the country. So, we slowly start to send more troops into Afghanistan so that we're getting upwards, by 2009, we're approaching about 40,000 troops in the country. The goal has stopped being just to create a democracy and do terrorist operations. The goal has now become to... The goal was originally to defeat the Taliban, but now, that goal reemerges. That goal returns, because we had thought the Taliban were defeated, and it turned out, they weren't. So, between 2006 to 2008, the goal becomes, we are going to actually defeat the Taliban and remove them. We don't want to send too many troops to do it, but that's our goal, and we're not going to stop until that's done.

Carter Malkasian: President Obama comes in, and he shifts some of that strategy. He is willing to send in more troops, and so the number of troops under him, between 2009 and 2011, raises to 100,000 U.S. troops in the country, which is the peak level that we get to. But his goal is not to defeat the Taliban. His goal is to break their momentum, make sure we defeat Al Qaeda, and to help the government enough that it can stand up on its own.

Carter Malkasian: So those forces and that stays in place until 2011 when President Obama starts to begin drawing down our forces. He draws down the forces down to about 9,600 by the end of 2014. He also wanted to get out, but he wasn't able to do that. Our goals in Afghanistan at this time again shift dramatically. Our focus just becomes on giving advising and assistance to the Afghan security forces. Our goals become to continue to operate against terrorist groups, but our goal certainly isn't to defeat the Taliban. It's really to stop having combat with them at all.

Carter Malkasian: That changes again in 2016, for a variety of reasons. Really, the strategy then turns into is we don't leave Afghanistan. We stay there, and the idea is, we'll have a small number of troops, and it's always around 10,000. We stay there. We prevent things from going bad, prevent the Taliban from taking over. Goals like nation-building, human rights are really not there. Now, protecting democracy and protecting human rights, that does kind of retain itself throughout. Democracy is more explicit than women's rights. Women's rights is more of an implicit goal that continues to exist in Afghanistan.

Carter Malkasian: Then finally, by the time that Trump comes in, the strategy changes more. We enter into negotiations with the Taliban to try to leave within 14 months. President Biden comes in, and we do that. So, that was a very quick overview of the war, and I'm not sure I covered everything you needed me to cover.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Annie Henderson: No, I think that's very helpful, and some of it is, we're trying to just ground people in so many different events that's happening. So, just trying to give people a good sense of where a couple of things have been happening. One thing I'm really curious about is, one of your books is *War Comes to Garmser*, is that how you--

Carter Malkasian: Garmser.

Reema Saleh: Garmser.

Carter Malkasian: It means hot place in Dari.

Annie Henderson: Well, it's in Southern Afghanistan ...

Carter Malkasian: Yes, it is.

Annie Henderson: So it is very aptly named, I assume. This was modeled after *War Comes to Long An*, which is a book about the Vietnam war. So, I'm really curious, as a historian, how do you view the comparisons that have been made between the Afghanistan and the Vietnam wars?

Carter Malkasian: On the one hand, when you're talking about how the U.S. does strategy and policy, you start seeing similarities, the length of the war, the fact that the earlier part of the war, we don't have a lot of forces. Then, we increase the number of forces. That increase in forces doesn't produce anything. We have phases of the war where we think counterinsurgency will work or nation-building will work, just like we did in Vietnam, and it doesn't succeed.

Carter Malkasian: We eventually get involved in negotiations with the adversary, and yet those negotiations follow a startlingly similar path, that in both cases, we're trying to get the adversary to concede, and in neither cases do they do that. In both cases, we're trying to trade our withdrawal of our troops to get the adversary to do something, and in both cases, we get very little out of the adversary, further withdrawal of our forces. In both cases, the end is a humiliating withdrawal from the capital of the country.

Carter Malkasian: Now, on the other hand, there are dramatic differences between Afghanistan and Vietnam, which are probably more important. At its height in Vietnam, we had about 600,000 troops on the ground. 100,000 is the height here, and for most of time, we had far fewer than that. 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam. In Afghanistan, it's still incredibly tragic, but the number is just shy of 2,500. So, there's a dramatic difference in that.

Carter Malkasian: Also, Vietnam, we have the draft, so people can be conscripted to go and fight. There's no draft in Afghanistan. In Vietnam, we have protests and riots throughout the country on a regular basis against the war. I challenge you to think of a single protest against the Afghan war. I don't even know of one at Berkeley, where I did my undergrad. I suspect there was one, but it's an indication of how the war had incredibly low salience for the American people. The American people maybe didn't think the war was necessary, but people weren't standing up to stop it. There was no real political cost for presidents staying in, somewhat of a political cost to getting out, if things went bad. So, these are fairly significant differences between the two.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Carter Malkasian: The other thing to really remember is that Vietnam did not involve a direct attack on the United States. The domino theory, that doesn't come from a direct attack on the United States. Afghanistan did have that, so that creates a greater reason to stay.

Carter Malkasian: I think, to nail the difference even more, that Afghanistan was a forgotten war while it was going on. It's likely to be forgotten quite soon. It's already being forgotten. Vietnam's not going to be forgotten. It's a part of the culture. It's deeply embedded in how America thinks about itself. So, that is also a dramatic difference between the two.

Annie Henderson: Can I ask why you think that is? I guess growing up, I don't really think of anti-war movements against the war in Afghanistan. I think that is a very marked difference, and I'm not sure why.

Carter Malkasian: The easiest way for me to say... The easiest ways to say it are, not as many Americans involved, not as many people having a son or... well, women weren't conscripted at that time, having a son drafted, being sent to go to the war, and possibly dying in the course of the war. Versus here, American service men and women volunteer to join, and they're sent out by choice, and those numbers are much smaller than the number of people who were going to Vietnam and being exposed to combat. So, that just means, on its own, you have a smaller base of people who are going to be most affected and most upset.

Carter Malkasian: Then, you have how we've treated the war because the war involved an attack on the United States, I think the press did certain things differently. There aren't pictures on the TV of wounded U.S. soldiers, or marines, or sailors, or airmen. That was the case during the Vietnam war. So, you don't see these highly traumatic pictures of what's going on. Now, there's battles and other, and there's plenty of coverage of it, and you can read about many things, but that level of really visceral feeling isn't there the same way. So, I think those help us understand it in a way that, how that's different from Vietnam.

Reema Saleh: Coming into your career a little bit more, you spent two years in Garmser, which is in Southern Afghanistan, as we discussed. You were there as a political officer with the State Department. What was your experience like, living in Afghanistan, meeting with the people there?

Carter Malkasian: It was one of the greatest experiences I have had, I think, because I got to go out, and you saw the Afghans every day. You saw the people coming into the base for something, and you'd go out places, and you'd go to the districts just about every day to see all the people that were coming into the lineup to go talk to, whether a village elder, someone coming in with a problem, policemen, religious leaders. They would be there to talk with.

Carter Malkasian: Then, occasionally, some women would come in. We had a few of the women on the team, and they would do most of those conversations, but sometimes, I was lucky enough to get to hear. That's very much a hidden part of Afghanistan, for most of us. You may see some women, especially if you're in Kabul, but if you're in the villages, you're not seeing many. You're not really supposed to talk to women.

Carter Malkasian: There's a lot about Afghanistan we still don't know, but there's a whole part of their society that was secluded from us, partitioned from us quite purposefully. It's disturbing in many, many ways. I say that in a sense that, I was lucky enough to see that, to have some small, very, very small window into that.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Carter Malkasian: Then, we would go to the villages, and eventually, things were good enough in the district that I could go to the villages without marines and go with the Afghans there, and spend time in those areas, and whether walking in the fields or sitting in a compound. When it was getting close to the time I was going to leave, kind of wondered how I would leave. I was sitting in a meeting. I was looking across at a variety of tribal leaders with their turbans on, and we were discussing politics and where things were going. I thought, "Wow, how am I going to leave this?" This is so unique, so different, in such a completely different, engrossing environment, that I thought, "How can I leave this?" But it's best for everyone's health if one does leave. If you stay somewhere for too long, I don't think it's a good thing.

Carter Malkasian: Then, I kept in touch with many of the friends there over time. Their lives are shorter than our lives are. They look at life a different way. There's many more things that are going to cause them to have an early death, and they know it. A lot of it's very, very random. They can't control when their time is going to come, not that... none of us can really control it, but they can't reduce it much. So, the next day is of much greater value than it is to us. Enjoying the moment, enjoying the night, enjoying the meal, enjoying the music, matters more. Worrying less about working every single day matters, because working every single day may not matter in the end, because something random can happen.

Carter Malkasian: You notice it in terms of, you have a certain... you're used to, in the United States, the rate at which people leave us. But in Afghanistan, if you're there for a while... Yeah, so that two years wasn't the only two years that I stayed there. I went after that, and then I kept in contact, and then I went there again. But you notice that the rate of people who are dying, who you know, is much greater than in the United States. That just enforces to you about how their lives are different.

Carter Malkasian: That also makes us understand how people feel about the Taliban right now. Why do they want to increase the risk that they're going to die early, increase the risk that they're going to extend the war? If letting the Taliban come in gives them a few more days of peace, it just helps one understand that situation.

Reema Saleh: I think that's a very interesting take. It's very refreshing to hear from someone who looks at this through a human lens, instead of, I think there's a lot written on how the Afghan people feel that comes from I think more... lacks a level of empathy about how they're actually living and experiencing their lives. So, I really, really liked what you have to say about that.

Carter Malkasian: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Annie Henderson: President Obama announced the beginning of troop draw-downs in 2014, and this was right before he became Special Assistant to Joint Chief of Staff Chairman General Joseph Dunford. How did this announcement impact your role and your work?

Carter Malkasian: President Trump's announcement or President Obama's?

Reema Saleh: Did I say President Trump or President Obama?

Carter Malkasian: President Obama in May of 2014?

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Reema Saleh: Yes.

Carter Malkasian: At that time, I was in Afghanistan. So, I remember that specifically. That had come after a long period of discussion about what the U.S. policy was going to be in Afghanistan, and how many troops we were going to keep, because it wasn't known if we were going to down to no troops, if we were going to keep maybe 10,000 troops, as roughly was kept, if we were going to have 12,000 troops, and what the role of those troops were going to be. There was a lot of concern that we would leave entirely, and the country could fall apart, a lot of it's on the part of the Afghans, and some in the U.S. government about that.

Carter Malkasian: So, there was careful negotiations, careful discussions about that, that were very well-handled to make sure they didn't get into the press, and they weren't politicized. Well, everything's politicized, but that they were less politicized than other things were. That ended up coming out that we would have a draw-down, down first in that year to 98, 9,600 and then that number would stay until 2015. Beginning of 2016, we would drop down to 5,500. Then, at the end, we would leave.

Carter Malkasian: Honestly, the sense that we had at that time was, we're pretty much doing things on track. That this will allow the Afghans to have some more advising, some more time with the Americans. It will help cover our security interests during that time. And then, the U.S. forces will leave. At that time, it also wasn't clear okay, so how many forces will stay at the embassy? What kind of role will they be having? So, it was kind of well, the future could... this could play out in a certain way, and we move forward.

Carter Malkasian: There wasn't a lot of negative reaction to that decision, at least where I was. It was, we're moving forward, and this is how things are going. Now, later on, those decisions get reversed, and they were reversed, like I mentioned before, because the Islamic State threat, but also reversed because the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, as the Taliban were taking more ground, so that if you're not there, if we go down to zero, then the Taliban will be able to succeed, and that will create terrorist threats upon the United States. That was the thinking.

Annie Henderson: So, as you move into this new role as Special Assistant to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, could you maybe just inform our listeners how civilian and military leaders work together on a conflict like Afghanistan? I think this is one of those things, as an expert I'm sure is very clear, but I think to a lot of people who are not familiar with how the U.S. works on this particular issue, it'd be really great to get a lay of the land.

Carter Malkasian: All right, so first of all, my role as a civilian is, there was to advise General Dunford. I was not a decision-maker. I was just someone advising him, really advising him for the advice he was going to give, or how he was going to interact in an engagement with a foreign leader, or maybe getting information for him, to help do things. So, I wasn't a policymaker myself.

Carter Malkasian: Now, how civilians and the military interact, the military has different high-ranking generals and admirals, which are often called four stars, and that's for the number of stars that they have on their collar, and sometimes on their... this is not a lapel, this is a shoulder. Those generals have a great deal of influence. Some of them command a service, like the Air Force, or the Marine Corps, or the Navy. Some of them command large commands, like Central Command, that you may have heard of, that handles the Middle East, or IndoPaCom Command, which handles all of the Pacific and out into the Indian ocean.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Carter Malkasian: Then, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he is a forcer. He's the most senior of them. He doesn't command them all. The person who commands them all, the way that chain of command works is, it first goes to the Secretary of Defense, so he has authority there, and then the President has authority there.

Carter Malkasian: Now, when a decision on a policy issue is made, it's usually made by the National Security Council, which at its highest level is going to be the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense civilians, and then usually the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a military representative. Sometimes, other generals may be there too, like the Centcom Commander and the IndoPaCom Commander, just depending on the situation. But when those decision are made, it's the President gets ... and there can be other people in National Security councils, like the Intelligence Director will be there. I'm just trying to give a general sense of what that looks like.

Carter Malkasian: The President makes the ultimate decision. The job of the military, the military cannot decide to enter a war, to leave a war. The military does not set policy goals. It doesn't say, "This is the reason we're in the war, and this is the reason we're going to attain it." What the military does is designs how to attain it and often gives options to the President or Secretary of Defense about how this can be attained.

Carter Malkasian: Now, for any particular issue, the chairmen or other military can offer their advice to the President about what to do, but that advice generally should stay out of... should definitely stay out of domestic politics, and should also stay away from policy goals. Everything's blurry. The domestic policy is not blurry, but the policy goals for the war that's very blurry, in terms of what's involved, who should have say in what, and who should be doing others. But in general, the military leadership should try to stay away from talking too much about the goals of a war.

Carter Malkasian: Why? Because you don't want the people who... Well, the main reason is, you don't want... the crucial thing is, you don't want them encouraging us to get into war. War is their business, so we want to keep that separate. But there's other reasons too, if there's anything about getting out of a war, it's perhaps best that the military is not giving advice on that, that that also works well for the President or what the goals of a conflict are. So, at the highest level, the civil military interaction works like that.

Carter Malkasian: But it works its way onto the lower level too, because within the Department of Defense, there's the military side. There's a whole nother office called the Office of the Secretary of Defense. So, they have lots of civilians in there, and they will help set policy goals, help with planning, help with giving... managing the force and making sure the policy goals are implemented, and then helping the SecDef, the Secretary of Defense, shape what he wants to do, and create his plans for what he wants to do. The military is kind of working in the same direction and will either give their advice separately to the Secretary of Defense or will work with OSD to give a common set of advice to them.

Carter Malkasian: Now, within these groups, I mentioned that there was the National Security Council. The National Security Council is a word with two meanings to it, which can be confusing. One is the National Security Council I just referred to, with a small number of people involved in it, one of whom I forgot to mention is the National Security Advisor. So, if you've heard of Henry Kissinger, I'm sure, or Brzezinski, more recently H.R. McMaster, Condoleezza Rice, Susan Rice, they were all National Security Advisors. Their

ROOT OF CONFLICT

role is to advise the President on national security, but probably more important, to coordinate that National Security Council meeting and the interaction between those other major players I mentioned at that National Security Council.

Carter Malkasian: Okay, so the other need for the National Security Council... I mentioned that one. The other one is the staff that serves the National Security Advisor and the President on national security issues. So, that staff that exists, they help coordinate those meetings, coordinate between all these different... the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, Intelligence. They help do the coordination between them, and they're often the ones that write the papers, that will go to the President and explain the issue in the first place, or write papers that explain what the decisions were of the various meetings.

Carter Malkasian: So, there's a combination of military on that staff and civilians on that staff. The civilians will interact both with the military on this stuff, plus they'll interact with the military and the Department of Defense. So, they will be creating their own issue briefings and their own ways of addressing topics that they are then talking to the military with.

Carter Malkasian: The last element of the civil-military relations, as I try not to turn this into a total lecture, is a relationship between Congress and the military, which is extremely important. In fact, the relationship with... You can often forget just how important that relationship is, because Congress confirms who... the three and four star generals up. They were confirmed by Congress. They have to report to Congress. They have to share essentially any information that Congress wants. There are certain political things and certain decisions that can be kept quiet or held in a classified session until it's coordination necessary that Congress needs to know.

Carter Malkasian: But Congress has a right to know these things. Congress approves the budgets. So, that is an important mechanism of authority, and checking and balancing against the military. But it's the answering to Congress that also ensures that the military is not overstepping its bounds and is probably more powerful in that respect than certain other elements of the government. The President is very powerful, and the Secretary of Defense is very powerful in that way, as well, but it's the combination there that plays a very big, big role.

Reema Saleh: Yeah, so I guess how did the wants of civilian and military leadership balance each other out, at the time, I guess, different aims kind of interact?

Carter Malkasian: They played out in different ways throughout the conflict. Early in the, say, in the Bush administration, it often played out with the civilians getting what they wanted on things, and that it's often highly criticized that in 2003, the military didn't have enough of a role in giving advice and setting planning, and allowed an invasion to go forward that shouldn't have gone forward because the military didn't defend its ground, didn't argue strongly, didn't show how difficult the situation could be, when many, many knew that.

Carter Malkasian: So, that later leads to a little bit of a recalibration at the end of the Bush administration, in which President Bush starts relaying on General Petraeus to get things done, because he feels that General Petraeus can actually take action, and he removes Rumsfeld. So, the generals, General Petraeus, McChrystal, some others, Mullen, who's then the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, they're able to have a lot of influence. Then, they have the success in the Iraq surge.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Carter Malkasian: It doesn't go as well in the early Obama administration. In the early Obama administration, there's a great interest on the part of a lot of the military in sending a large number of troops into Afghanistan, trying to resolve the situation in Afghanistan. They feel they can do that because of the success of their operations in Iraq previously. So, the same generals that had gained influence, the same generals that had gained influence under Bush come into the Obama administration with that point of view, with that mindset, and that leads to friction with the new incoming Obama administration.

Carter Malkasian: In this case, a lot of military leaders feel that Afghanistan is very important to go into, to resolve the situation there, whereas President Obama, in his book *A Promised Land*, discusses this in great detail. It is a great book. He is more worried about the country as a whole. He's worried about the recession that's happened. He's worried about his healthcare package. He's worried about all the other things he has to worry about as President.

Carter Malkasian: So, he doesn't want to commit large numbers of forces to Afghanistan forever, because it costs about a million dollars a year for one soldier in Afghanistan, which that means for 100,000 troops, that computes, with a little bit additional that's there, it computed to 100, 120 billion per year. So, over the total, over the whole tenure, the petroleum dollars, that's the size of the Economic Relief Package. So, he thought, I'm not spending this kind of money on an engagement in Afghanistan, compared to economic relief for the American people. He was not comfortable with going in that direction, so there was friction there.

Carter Malkasian: Then, there was more friction because the military didn't present a lot of options to the President. One of the most important things that should be presented to leaders are options, different ways to go about solving what a problem should be. But they didn't do that, and so that made it hard for President Obama to have choices on what to do.

Carter Malkasian: The biggest problem there at that time was what Biden and others defined as, the generals, to a certain extent, wanted to... inadvertently or purposefully boxed in the president, because they started talking on TV about how their option, which was counterinsurgency and sending more forces, was the best option. They did it in front of Congress. There was an op ed; McChrystal did it in London. There was a leak of McChrystal's assessment that this should be done.

Carter Malkasian: So, what all this does is, it makes it much more difficult for the President to do whatever he wants to do, because the military has laid out there, "This is my plan." So, if the President doesn't do that, and anything goes wrong, all the critics are going to say, "You didn't listen to the generals." The new President incoming, so it's even more difficult to deal with these problems. You asked about the friction between the civilians and the military. That is a foremost example of the friction, the difficulties that existed.

Carter Malkasian: Later on, it improves, probably because some of those generals left, for various reasons, and it improves because the generals that followed them, and the admirals that followed them, were much more concerned about maintaining trust of the White House. Also, they were just less... They believed less that you could actually win in Afghanistan.

Carter Malkasian: You talked about the 2014, Obama's decision to withdraw in 2014. That whole process was managed very carefully and kept secret because everyone was so aware that letting it loose previously had

ROOT OF CONFLICT

been problematic. Everyone's intent was, we're going down the same path, and we're going to find the best solution. We're not going to get stuck into arguing for whatever option we particularly might think is best. It's not about what options is best. It's about laying out a way forward that's a good process and doesn't create problems and issues. So, that went better. Anyways--

Annie Henderson: No. That actually is really helpful, because I was going to ask you about your personal experience. You mention transitioning between Presidents, and you've served under both Barack Obama and President Trump. So, I'm curious, how was that transition for you personally? What was it like, switching your advice from one president to another?

Carter Malkasian: Because I was advising General Dunford, it wasn't that hard for me, because I didn't have to... I had the same boss. I had the same leader who I was giving advice to. I was working in the military structure, not in the civilian structure. Civilian structure requires lots of new leaders. The military structure just went about doing its thing, right? They have a whole process for when generals come into certain places, and officers come into certain places, and they go to a new place. So, that process just kept on going the same way it was before.

Carter Malkasian: People know that the Trump administration was very turbulent, but I was in a place where I didn't have those similar experiences because I was there advising the same boss that I had had previously. Did the issues change? Yes, the issues changed. The approach to Syria was a little bit different. The whole North Korea crisis with Kim Jong-un, and shooting missiles into the air and fiery rhetoric, that was all there. We worked a great deal to try to make sure that situation was dealt with responsibly. Over time, President Trump shifts the Afghan policy even more to talk about getting out, and so I was involved in those negotiations. So, there's no doubt we were dealing with different issues.

Carter Malkasian: But personally, it wasn't that tough. Look, there's all kinds of other ethical and other issues regarding that administration, but I was divorced from that because of the place I was in, which gave one a comfort in what they were doing.

Reema Saleh: Let's talk about the withdrawal. You were part of negotiations with the Taliban under President Trump, which resulted in the Doha Agreement in 2021. Could you talk us through these negotiations, and what was this approach to ending the war in Afghanistan?

Carter Malkasian: First, there was a realization that... this was about 2017 actually, that a lot of the military operations should be support negotiations, that a negotiated solution could be a way out of the conflict that satisfied everyone's interests. At that time, the idea of withdrawing all of our troops wasn't really... that wasn't really there in 2017, although some people, myself included, said, "Look, you're not going to get a deal unless you do that. The Taliban are not going to stop fighting if there's U.S. soldiers, so whatever the deal involves, it's going to have to involve withdrawal of our forces."

Carter Malkasian: There's President Trump, who kind of enforces that and wants that to happen, such that Ambassador Khalilzad then... after negotiations start, which is really in the autumn of 2018, then he puts that on the table, and then things start shifting, where the Taliban are willing to give a little more.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Carter Malkasian: What we wanted from the Taliban was for them to... We wanted a few things from the Taliban. One was that they would guarantee that they wouldn't help assist Al Qaeda, wouldn't let Al Qaeda launch any attacks from Afghanistan on other countries. So, that was one of the most... That was negotiated intensively, and of course, we want as many guarantees as we can get. They want as much freedom of action as they can get.

Carter Malkasian: So, that goes back and forth. But the Taliban did promise, "We won't train, equip, recruit, fundraise, allow any of that to... allow any training, equipping, fundraising to happen inside of Afghanistan. We won't allow there to be attacks from Afghanistan on other countries." That was in return for the idea that, at some point, we would completely withdraw our forces.

Carter Malkasian: We wanted a ceasefire. We also wanted there to be a political settlement between the Afghans and the Taliban. We wanted them to come together, go through a new political process, write a new constitution, set up a new government, so that it would be inclusive and all sides would be brought together, a negotiated end to the fighting.

Carter Malkasian: Now, to make that happen, eventually, it's decided to withdraw ... within 14 months, to withdraw all of our forces. So, negotiations go in that direction. Look, dealing with the Taliban, it was fascinating. It wasn't my first time dealing with them, but I can tell you that they were very committed, believed in their cause, believed in establishing Islamic law throughout Afghanistan, were deeply religious, not fake. They really do pray five times a day, and they really are committed to Islam. Four of them had been in Guantanamo Bay prison and had been released earlier, and they were now part of the negotiating group. They were, of course, interesting to talk to. Some of them didn't seem to like Americans very much. Others were more okay with talking to Americans. One of that group was particularly athletic and enjoyed playing football and such, which was interesting.

Carter Malkasian: The Taliban generally were standoffish, and that's kind of a combination of two things, I think. One is that we were their adversary, and the other is, they are established, accomplished people in their own respects, so they just might've felt that that was appropriate to do. But they could, at times, be warm and interested, and I certainly learned a bit about Islam from them, and certainly learned a few new words from them. So, that went really well.

Carter Malkasian: But anyway, so the agreement was signed in 29 February of 2022. A friend of mine calls it the Leap Year Agreement. That stipulated the withdrawal in 14 months. What it wasn't able to stipulate was on a firm ceasefire. It wasn't able to stipulate real political negotiations. It said political negotiations to start by 10 March, I think, so it was about 10 days. It had certain small requirements about what those negotiations should establish, but it wasn't detailed and firm about it. It didn't say that you need to have a constitution by now, or that we will only withdraw if these things are met.

Carter Malkasian: So, it's open-ended. It's what in diplomatic terms is called constructive ambiguity, which is the idea that if two sides don't get on very well and have lots of differences, if we can just look at, what is a common goal we have in the future, and say, "Okay, we're both after that goal," then we can at least advance in that direction, and the process can get moving. Without specifying what each side is going to give, what the negotiations are specifically going to look like. We just have a broad agreement on principles.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Carter Malkasian: So, that was the idea behind this, but in the end, there weren't enough details in it, I think, for it to survive. So, after that's signed, well a few things happened. First, the Taliban are intransigent, and they won't—and by this time I'm not part of the negotiations anymore—the Taliban are intransigent. They are not going to concede on any further movement until they get every single thing that they want out of the Afghan government.

Carter Malkasian: Another part of it is that the Afghan government, President Ashraf Ghani, wasn't terribly interested in making a lot of concessions, partly because he thinks, "I don't have that much more left to give. Why am I going to give more? We have to start negotiations some time, and they're making me give everything before I get to negotiations. I'm not doing that." His position is certainly understandable. Whether it was right for us or turned out the best is perhaps a different question.

Carter Malkasian: The third reason though that things didn't go well was that President Trump withdrew our forces ahead of the schedule. We have a certain rate of what the draw-down was supposed to be. He went ahead of that rate. As we withdrew more forces, we were less able to hold things together on the battlefield. So, the Taliban could sense that they were gaining more ground and could sense that we were not going to be determined... that we were going to carry out the 14 months, or something close to it. So, there wasn't a lot of reason for them to continue to negotiate with us. We were losing our leverage.

Carter Malkasian: So then, by the time President Biden has to make a decision, he's judging between go to zero or keep 2,500. Well, keep 2,500 could perhaps have done some things, like still going after terrorists and such, but 2,500 wasn't going to be enough to convince the Taliban to come seriously to the negotiating table with concessions, because they knew at 2,500, they could control a lot of the country.

Reema Saleh: This actually leads into the next question we're hoping to ask you, which is, President Biden did largely stick to the agreement that was laid out and the plan I think that had come out of those agreements. So, I'm really curious, did this surprise you, or would you say that President Biden had any kind of additional changes to that plan in any meaningful way, besides pushing back the timelines?

Carter Malkasian: He pushed back the timeline. It depends how you look at the agreements, is a better way to say it. The agreement by one point of view, the view that Zalmay Khalilzad the envoy often said, was that nothing's agreed until everything's agreed, which meant that if the Taliban don't meet what we want... They even say this verbally. You can hear Pompeo say this and Khalilzad say this, "If they don't come to a political settlement, well then we're not withdrawing. Our withdrawal is conditioned upon them meeting what has been agreed upon at Doha." Now, some of the things agreed upon at Doha, if they're not written down, they become fuzzy and ambiguous. So, we would say that.

Carter Malkasian: But the biggest thing President Biden basically did is, he moved off that point, and we were withdrawing. I guess we could debate whether we see it as a fundamental change or a minor change in what was done. But he moved off that. Now, between the... At the time, I thought the decision between staying and leaving, they're both viable options. We could have done either, but leaving, from a strategic, big picture view appeared to be the more compelling of the two choices. Again, that doesn't mean staying was not viable, or ridiculous, or crazy or something. It wasn't. It could've been done.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Carter Malkasian: It wasn't going to solve the war. It wasn't going to end the war. It was just going to protect our interests. Even me saying it that way is the wrong way to say it. It puts greater insurance against our interests. We don't know if it protects it or not. There's greater insurance against it. So, that's a viable strategy, but leaving was also a viable strategy, and given, for all the reasons that I talked about previously, by this point, much more compelling to leave.

Reema Saleh: Was this approach popular with the military? How did the military leadership view the process of leaving?

Carter Malkasian: I think that probably varies a little bit, and I wasn't privy to the discussions in 2021 in any serious kind of way. So, I can tell you that the decisions to leave and to go forward with negotiations, and press forward with negotiations, that the generals whom I worked with, General Dunford, General Miller, General McKenzie, General Votel, they were all behind the negotiations. They did not argue against the negotiations. They did not, when decisions had to be made about negotiations, I mean including the final agreement, they didn't say, "Oh, we're not going with this. We reject it." Because they believed that it was the military's job being in support of the diplomacy, they supported moving forward with the negotiations and with that final agreement.

Carter Malkasian: Does that mean that there weren't debates and issues between the civilians and the military? Of course not. On a variety of little issues, and little things, and can't we get more here, and why do we give so much here, of course there's debates and issues on that. But there was no, "We refuse to go with this agreement."

Carter Malkasian: Now, in the open press, when it comes to President Biden's final decision to leave, it said that various generals, including General Milley, thought that we should've kept more forces there, and thought that this was better... Now, this is just in the press, so I can't confirm anything that's there, because I don't know. I haven't talked to anyone who's in those meetings. I obviously haven't seen meeting notes on it. So, I don't know what actually happened there, but that's probably just indicative of, once we're in the process of leaving, it just becomes harder.

Carter Malkasian: So, it was one thing to say it's the more compelling choice to do in early 2021, it's way different to see it playing out on the ground, and when you're seeing Kabul fall, and you're talking to people you know over the phone, and people are worried, people think they're going to die, some people are dying, and everything's crumbling and falling apart.

Carter Malkasian: You don't need me to tell you. You can read it various places, that there's obviously, on the part of a variety of military and a variety of civilians, great concern about how we left and what happened, and why did we just spend 20 years sacrificing everything for this to be the result? I think a lot of that's natural, given the stress and such, that the situation was in then.

Annie Henderson: I think you've touched on this a little bit, but I want to ground us a little bit more and then ask for a little bit wider view on this, which is, in July of 2021, President Biden said, and I'll quote here, "The Taliban is not the North Vietnamese Army. They're not remotely comparable, in terms of capability. There's going to be no circumstance where you're going to see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy."

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Annie Henderson: I think he obviously came to regret that specific statement in comparison. After President Biden made those remarks, months later, the Taliban had conquered Kabul, and the Afghan President had fled the country, and we also had a suicide bomber kill 180 people, including American service members outside of Kabul's airport. So, I'm really curious, why was there such a large difference between the public expectation for the withdrawal and what actually happened, as someone who's sat advising the people who are making these decisions. I'm really curious, in your mind, where do you think some of those differences came from?

Carter Malkasian: It was always possible Afghanistan was going to unravel quickly. Afghanistan's history has a variety of occasions when, when the wind starts to blow one way, people try to ... groups shift in another direction. It's not entirely unique to Afghanistan. It just happens to be, we can look to immediate history and see some occasions of this in Afghan history, especially our advancement into Afghanistan in 2001, which the Taliban didn't put up much resistance. They just folded and went away. Depending on how we look at it, we can see it's even in the same amount of time that that all happened.

Carter Malkasian: So, this was always a possibility, that that could happen. It's hard to estimate the number of months or weeks in which something will happen like that. When you're looking at it, you have to consider okay, what are the things I think could happen for this to go to... that would make this go quickly? So, that's the Taliban are organized enough for, that they have enough logistics to move fast from place to place, that the government's Northern Alliance forces don't stand up, that no outside country gives greater assistance. These are some of the common things that are there, but you don't know. You don't know which way things could go, and you also don't know how much the Taliban would be inspired, or how much the government forces will be inspired.

Carter Malkasian: That should leave you, I think, if you're good to say, or if you're thinking broadly, to say, we don't know. There's a range of time in which this could happen, and I need to consider the different times in which this could happen, and the different things we might do for each of those. So, I guess you could say that that uncertainty is why President Biden said, "Well, no. It's not like that. It could be different."

Carter Malkasian: Another way to say this is, we can't predict the future, right? No one can predict the future. So, we shouldn't really expect politicians to do it. We shouldn't expect intel analysts to do it, as smart as they are, because it's an unrealistic thing to expect of someone. That's probably somewhat of a lesson from this. We have to think about, what's the broad range of ways this thing could work out, and are we ready for dealing with things, and have we laid out the indicators to see how it could change? What are the flashing red lights that we should be starting to see, that will make us say, "Okay, it's not going to fall in six months. It's going to fall in three months. It's not going to fall in three months. It's falling now." How do you start to translate that?

Reema Saleh: This might be an unrealistic question, but what conditions do you think would've been necessary to produce a better outcome?

Carter Malkasian: In Afghanistan?

Reema Saleh: Yes.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Carter Malkasian: That's a good question. It depends what you mean by outcome, but when we take something that would be realistic for an outcome, our realistic outcome for the war in Afghanistan was not winning. A realistic outcome for the war in Afghanistan would be something that lost fewer American lives, cost less money, and could've been managed better.

Carter Malkasian: So, what would've been needed to do that? Well, after defeating the Taliban, we shouldn't have been so overconfident. I mean, after toppling the regime in 2001, we shouldn't have been so overconfident. We should've thought that there's different ways history can play out, and one of them, for an insurgency, is that the insurgents return and form a threat.

Carter Malkasian: So, if we weren't overconfident, then we might've thought well, how can we deal with the Taliban? Can we negotiate with them now? Also, what kind of military forces do they need if they need to fight them? In a good world, that maybe would've prevented the war. In the much more likely world, it just would've made the war easier to manage, less costly.

Carter Malkasian: So, overconfidence there. Later on, take the surge. We probably shouldn't have surged. Why did we surge? Because we were so concerned about the threat from Afghanistan, and we cared so much about one option that we crowded out the other possible options that were there. President Obama should've had more options. One option could've been not to surge at all. Another option could've been to take away a few troops. I don't think you could've gotten all of them out.

Carter Malkasian: Another option could've been to surge a few troops. An option could've been well, don't decrease the numbers but stay long. You're going to have to stay long if you want to do any of these things. All of those things could've prevented a situation that would've lost fewer lives and cost less money, and a lot of those are related to our overconfidence, or not considering enough options, or not understanding that history... that the future's going to play out in different ways than you actually think it's going to play out.

Carter Malkasian: So, a lot of it gets down to the flexibility of one's strategy. A lot of it gets into: how overconfident are we? So, I think those are the things that I think we could've done differently to get to somewhere else.

Reema Saleh: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict featuring Carter Malkasian. This episode was produced and edited by Reema Saleh and Ricardo Sande. Thank you to our interviewers, Annie Henderson and Reema Saleh. Special thanks to UC3P and The Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. For more information on The Pearson Institute's research and events, visit thepearsoninstitute.org and follow them on Twitter.