

My Intervention during the Debate on the Situation in Afghanistan

John Redwood Conservative, Wokingham

Does my right hon. Friend have any advice for the Government on how they could take action to try to prevent the recurrence of a terrorist threat under Taliban control?

Tobias Ellwood Chair, Defence Committee, Chair, Defence Committee, Chair, Defence Sub-Committee, Chair, Defence Sub-Committee

My fear is that there will be an attack on the lines of 9/11 to bookend what happened 20 years ago, to show the futility of 20 years. We should never have left—I will come to that in a second—because after 20 years of effort, this is a humiliating strategic defeat for the west. The Taliban control more territory today than they did before 9/11.

I was born in the United States; I am a proud dual national and passionate about the transatlantic security alliance. Prior to him declaring his candidacy, I worked directly with President Biden on veterans' mental health issues. He was the keynote speaker at a veterans reception here in the House of Commons, as my guest, so it gives me no joy to criticise the President and say that the decision to withdraw, which he inherited, but then chose to endorse, was absolutely the wrong call. Yes, two decades is a long time. It has been a testing chapter for Afghanistan, so the US election promise to return troops was obviously a popular one, but it was a false narrative.

First, the notion that we gave the Afghans every opportunity over 20 years to progress, and that the country cannot be helped forever so it is time to come home, glosses over the hurdles—the own goals—that we created after the invasion. We denied the Taliban a seat at the table back in 2001. They asked to attend the Bonn talks but Donald Rumsfeld said no, so they crossed the Pakistan border to rearm, regroup and retrain. How different the last few decades would have been had they been included. Secondly, we did not start training the Afghan forces until 2005, by which time the Taliban were already on the advance. Finally, we imposed a western model of governance, which was completely inappropriate for Afghanistan, with all the power in Kabul. That was completely wrong for a country where loyalty is on a tribal and local level. That is not to dismiss the mass corruption, cronyism and elitism that is rife across Afghanistan, but those schoolboy errors in stabilisation hampered progress and made our mission harder.

There is also the notion that we cannot fight a war forever. We have not been fighting for the last three years. The US and the UK have not lost a single soldier, but we had a minimalist force there—enough assistance to give the Afghan forces the ability to contain the Taliban and, by extension, give legitimacy to the Afghan Government. The US has more personnel based in its embassy here than it had troops in Afghanistan before retreating. Both the US

and the UK have long-term commitments across the world, which we forget about. Japan, Germany and Korea have been mentioned. There is Djibouti, Niger, Jordan and Iraq, and ourselves in Cyprus and Kenya, for example, and the Falklands, too. It is the endurance that counts. Success is not rated on when we return troops home. Such presence offers assurance, represents commitment, bolsters regional stability, and assists with building and strengthening the armed forces. That is exactly what we were doing in Afghanistan.

Last year, the Taliban were finally at the negotiation table in Doha, but in a rush to get a result, Trump struck a deal with the Taliban—by the way, without the inclusion of the Afghan Government—and committed to a timetable for drawdown. All the Taliban had to do was wait. The final question is about whether the UK can lead or participate in a coalition without the US. Where is our foreign policy determined—here or in Washington? Our Government should have more confidence in themselves.