



Transcript

Afghanistan: Is it Mission Impossible?

BBC Radio 4 Recording

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Eddie Mair:

Hello and welcome to the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, in London, where for the second year running we have a BBC Radio 4 debate about the presence of the UK in Afghanistan, or as our programme title puts it, 'Afghanistan: is it mission impossible?' Our five panellists have differing views on this subject, and as you'd expect here at Chatham House, the audience is fiercely well informed and will have a chance to ask questions of their own.

In the year since we were here last, Britain has spent 3 billion pounds on its military operation in Afghanistan and 200 million on development. There are almost a thousand more British personnel serving there and in the course of the year, almost 100 members of the British armed forces have been killed, with at least as many seriously wounded.

As a backdrop to tonight's debate, we can add to those figures some new information, the results of an opinion poll about the war conducted for this programme. Over last weekend, ICM asked a random sample of 1,010 adults across Britain, 'Do you support or oppose the British military operations in Afghanistan?' Supporting it, 37 percent; opposing it, 56 percent. One percent of those polled refused to answer that question and 6 percent didn't know. Now that's roughly the same as opposed and supported the military operation three years ago, though more people appear to have made up their minds.

Here to introduce themselves, the five panellists who will form the backbone of tonight's debate.

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I'm Francesc Vendrell, I was the UN and later the EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan between 2000 and 2008.

Lindsey German:

I'm Lindsey German from the Stop the War coalition. We were formed to oppose the Afghan War in 2001 and I've been campaigning against it ever since.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

I'm Brigadier Buster Howes, I'm the Head of Overseas Operations in the Ministry of Defence, and I'm responsible for integrating military policy with wider Whitehall priorities.

Eric Joyce MP:

I'm Eric Joyce, I'm the Labour MP for Falkirk and a former army officer and was for awhile an aide to the Defence Secretary.

Dr John Mackinlay:

I'm John Mackinlay, I teach at King's College London and the significant course is the 'Evolution of Insurgency'.

Eddie Mair:

Thank you for that. We will hear the formal opening arguments from all five panellists in a moment. But let's take a poll of what our audience here at Chatham House thinks. It's made up of business people, academics, people from the region and diplomats. I'm going to put a series of options to you from 'mission impossible' to 'mission possible'. When you hear the one that's closest to your personal view, if you could please raise your hand. I'll give you the options first. The first is 'very possible, if we had a clearer idea of what we want to do' - just about half a dozen hands. The second is 'possible, but increasingly difficult' - more hands, maybe just under half the room. The third is 'barely possible anymore' - another substantial number. And finally, 'impossible' - a bit more than half a dozen. As far as our audience here is concerned, there is a mix between 'possible, but increasingly difficult' and 'barely possible anymore'.

What about our panellists? The question is 'Afghanistan: is it mission impossible?' They have 90 seconds each to set out their views. We'll start with Francesc Vendrell who was the European Union's Special Envoy Representative to Afghanistan from 2002 until last year and before that he was the personal representative of the UN Secretary General for Afghanistan. Ambassador, is it mission impossible?

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

Well I think that it isn't impossible but it is becoming increasingly difficult to carry it out, because of the lack of vision and courage on the part of the international community, and also on the part of the Afghan government. I feel it is possible to succeed but it requires a basic shift in policy that I fear many governments may well shy away from. There is a wrong dichotomy between those who say nation-building and those who say simply concentrate on fighting Al Qaeda. You can't defeat the later without winning the Afghan

public's support. And that requires good governance, rule of law, and prioritising job creation.

Lindsey German:

Well I feel very much that it is mission impossible. I think the war is being lost in Afghanistan, and it's an unwinnable war. It's not a war which is about humanitarian aims, that is clear. Ten times as much is spent on the military than is spent on reconstruction. It's not a war for democracy. We saw very clearly in the election how corrupt it was. It's not a war which is making Britain a safer place; in fact there is a very strong argument that the growth of Islamic terrorism has come after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And it is a war which is worsening. The number of deaths of NATO soldiers is rising all the time, the number of Afghan deaths is rising, and the Taliban according to a recent report now have a permanent presence in 80 percent of the country.

I think the only thing we can do is say that the war on the occupation has made the situation worse. We have to, far from putting more troops in, we have to withdraw the troops that are there and allow the Afghans the right to run their own country. If we want to help them, then some of the billions of pounds that are being spent on the war should be spent on reconstruction of one of the poorest countries in the world.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

It is emphatically not mission impossible, but challenging, complex, dynamic, sometimes harrowing, yes. Britain is not grappling with this challenge alone, however. The entire international community has a vital stake in underpinning a stable and more secure Afghanistan. 42 nations are engaged in that activity. Our freedoms and security are dependent on influences far from our shores, and international terrorism is trying daily to attack our society. The atrocities conducted around the world testify to this. Three quarters of the terrorist plots skilfully pre-empted by Britain's security services gestate in the ungoverned space of central Asia. Regrettably the media focuses almost exclusively on the fighting in Afghanistan, but this is not just a military endeavour. As Francesc has said, rule of law, governance and reconstruction and development activities are central to the effort.

Significant, clear, tangible progress has been made in all of these areas. Yes, we experienced setbacks, but the trend is positive. In Britain, however, we suffer from Helmand myopia. Helmand is but one of 30 provinces in Afghanistan, but it witnesses 40 percent of significant acts of violence daily.

So our task can seem a particularly tough one, and the past six months have indeed been exceptionally bloody. But our aims are realistic and achievable. Our mantra in Helmsnd is 'good enough'. We are not engaged in some misguided project to create Berkshire in the Hindu Kush.

Eddie Mair:

I'm going to ask you to pause there. Eric Joyce was a major in the army, now a Labour MP. Last month he resigned as an aide to the Defence Secretary, calling on Gordon Brown to make clear to the British people that the Afghanistan campaign was time-limited. Is it mission impossible though?

Eric Joyce MP:

Not quite, I think it's getting pretty close. If I could just flag up three preconditions for what we might eventually define as success. The first is that we clearly make a disproportionate effort, in comparison with our European allies. Unless we get that right, I think increasingly a British public will think, why is it that we're arguing that it's to make it safer on the streets of London, but not saying it's any safer on the streets of Berlin, or Rome, or Madrid or Paris? There's clearly a disproportionate effort. We whine constantly about our allies, but the fact is we don't really expect them to do as much as we do. I think increasingly if we don't get them to do more, we should simply not do more ourselves and that's the harsh political reality.

I think there's been a fraudulent election, and we should recognise that very overtly, they're not trying to sweep it under the carpet. There's a bit of sweeping under the carpet going on about what we should be doing about a fraudulent election. We've based some of our activity there on a so-called justification that we're building some kind of democratic society. That's not the right argument. The scope for increasing public scepticism, because we haven't been clear enough on condemning the fraudulent election.

And finally, for the moment, we've not shown enough empathy for our armed services and I think the whole of society is to blame for that. If I can flag up one indicator of empathy, and I've said this before and I'll say it again. The MoD has a court case going which is designed to reduce the compensation of ill troops. What we have to do is cease that because that is the worst possible demonstration of a lack of empathy.

Eddie Mair:

Dr John Mackinlay is a counter-insurgency expert from King's College in London.

Dr John Mackinlay:

Eddie, rather awkwardly I'm going to sort of shimmy around your question by saying that I think there's a bigger question that overshadows this debate, which is, should we be there at all? The Prime Minister says that British troops in Afghanistan prevent more bomb attacks taking place in the UK and that our operations there prevent British domiciled extremists from getting to those training areas on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. But the fact is, it hasn't and the 15 bomb plots organised in this country since 9/11 were simply not defeated by the operations that were going on in Afghanistan, they were defeated by operations which take place in this country under the Home Office.

Right now, the epicentre of the insurgent energy which menaces this country, is *here*, in UK. It's not in Afghanistan. Furthermore, we don't share the same security problems in this respect as the United States and by committing our troops to Afghanistan to support the US, in my view we are *exacerbating*, not improving, the security of our own population, which should come first. As a nation, I believe that we probably can cope with the problems of withdrawing from Afghanistan, but we absolutely cannot afford to lose or jeopardise our security campaign in the UK.

Eddie Mair:

This is the first time all five panellists have had a chance to hear, at first hand, the views of all the others and I would encourage you now, if there's a question you want to put or a point you want to contradict, this may be the moment. Buster Howes, I was struck by how Dr Mackinlay had a completely different view and has completely different figures for how well protected we are by this war in this country.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

The figures he introduces are those in the public domain, and casting a cloak of secrecy over things is suggesting that one has a sort of knowledge, is never helpful. But there is a great deal of endeavour from terrorists in the places where we are committed overseas to train and to penetrate our

security. Some of it gets here; some of it is disrupted by the Home Office, but quite a lot of it is disrupted by steely boys wearing desert uniforms.

Lindsey German:

But there is no evidence that any terrorism is coming from Afghanistan. That is simply a fact. If you look at where Al Qaeda is supposed to be now, it's in Pakistan, which is one reason the war has spread there. But are we arguing therefore that the war should continue there?

Dr John Mackinlay:

But Brigadier, wouldn't you agree that the net direction of the attack is from within this country? The people who are attacking us are not coming from Helmand or Afghanistan or Pakistan or East Kashmir. They are usually people who are British domiciled and some are British passport holders. Very many of them have been in this country for a very long time.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

There is a nexus between the two. We have a particular set of circumstances in this country which comes from the fact that there are 1.5 million Pakistanis domiciled here. There are 27 thousand Afghans living here. The reason why nobody from Al Qaeda has been apprehended or killed in Afghanistan for probably two years... your statement for that is correct. But the reason is that we're there. It is no longer an ungoverned space. The Taliban no longer have free reign.

Eddie Mair:

I wonder again from the opening remarks that you all made, is there anything any of you want to say to each other?

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I always talk about the Afghans. I think that calling for the withdrawal from Afghanistan is basically saying 'let the Afghan people down once again'. Let them succumb to either a medieval philosophy, like that of the Taliban. Or let those who are not in the Taliban govern but by a series of commander and warlords.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

I think 85 percent of those asked recently in Afghanistan welcomed the intervention and continued participation of the international community in their struggles. Five percent support the Taliban.

Eric Joyce MP:

But what I'm more concerned about is what people in the UK think, and to be perfectly honest I respect what you say about looking after the Afghans, but that's not a public justification for why we are in Afghanistan now. Unless you can take it back to the safety of people in the UK and in Europe and amongst our allies, then you can't possibly sustain the level of casualties and justify it as we are trying to do at the moment.

Eddie Mair:

Can I ask you all a question which might seem odd given that the war has been raging for some time? What is the mission? Who has the answer to that?

Lindsey German:

Well there isn't an answer to it, because there isn't a clear mission.

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I think there is a fairly clear answer. The answer is that we don't want Afghanistan to become again a focus of terrorism. We don't want to give space for Al Qaeda or similar people to regroup and to pose the kind of threat they posed before September 11. But we also have, in order to achieve that, we need to build up a country in Afghanistan, which has been destroyed over the last 25 years.

Eddie Mair:

So stopping terrorism and nation-building?

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

Yes.

Lindsey German:

I think firstly we are not spending the money that could be spent on education and all these things. 40 percent of the money that goes in in aid goes back in profits to the Western companies. But it's also, we should remember, this war has gone on for eight years. The Taliban was defeated at the end of 2001. In 2002 there were only 5,000 US troops in Afghanistan. There are now 68,000. There were nearly 100,000 in total. You have to ask yourself, why is it, if the occupation has been so successful, that so many troops are now needed? I really can't take the opinion poll seriously, perhaps because I don't take the election seriously. Support for the Taliban and other forms of occupation is clearly growing in many parts of the country.

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I think it's clear the Taliban were not defeated, they were driven out. They went home, laid down their weapons, and many moved into Pakistan. It was in this period, between 2001 and 2006 that they were able to regroup in Pakistan and then infiltrate back in Afghanistan.

Eddie Mair:

Is everyone on the panel agreed with Francesc Vendrell's assessment, that it's about stopping terrorism and nation building, hand-in-hand, nothing else?

Eric Joyce MP:

I'm increasingly thinking that what the British public probably want is to minimise the risk to us; I think people are getting quite isolationist about it and saying, 'well it's a problem for the Afghans'.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

I think isolationism is a sort of luxury which we simply don't have.

Eric Joyce MP:

I mean isolating the Afghan problem, not being isolationist as a country.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

But how does one do that without going there and attempting to fix the problem? I concur entirely with Francesc's point, that it's about addressing the insurgency and building capacity. We attempted the former as a simple solution to the problem and then went away. A temporary hiatus was achieved and nothing more, the enemy came back. We have to invest for a longer period.

Dr John Mackinlay:

I'm not sure that this question is very relevant. We're looking at an enormous international force which has 43 nations in NATO plus 400 NGOs plus endless numbers of bilateral donors and so forth. Most of these people have their own interest in being there. The idea that this swarm of participants are all flying under the same banner is wrong. There are about 43 different missions for Afghanistan and I think even from the beginning we went in for a purely emotional reason, as a response to 9/11, and that began to change. I think the question doesn't actually tell you very much.

Eddie Mair:

You keep reframing our questions, I like that.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

You describe any intervention in history. People always act in self interest, and our interest is marginally different to the French. Does that mean that in the First World War that we shouldn't have collaborated?

Dr John Mackinlay:

No, but I think if you look at your history of the post-Cold War period, there are a lot of international forces which burnt and crashed simply because they didn't have a consensus within the participants. That has been an epidemic since the Berlin Wall. This, after all, is just another in that generation. We shouldn't be shattered by the surprise that it's following in the same path.

Eric Joyce MP:

One of the great failings over the last few years has been a failure to put any power behind the European Security and Defence Policy, and as a

consequence of that, the disparity in effort at the moment is preposterous. The last thing that you need to say is 'what do the British public think'. I spend every single day, especially during this long recess, talking to people in my constituency. It pretty much reflects the figures that we've just heard this evening. People are very unhappy about the level of casualties. They listen to, I think General Richards is a fabulous officer, they listen to the possibility of three to five more years, casually elicited from officers, like the Brigadier, with respect... and you can't ignore that. You can't read from a book and tell us how it is down here. If you go and talk to people, they feel profoundly about this stuff. It's not good enough to say we just continue with this disproportionate effort.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

I take exception to your casual description; I've been to 14 funerals this year. There is nothing casual about the soldiers' engagement in this. It may sound casual in a pinstripe suit sitting in Whitehall. But there's nothing casual.

Lindsey German:

Surely the point is if you were going to justify these soldiers dying in the war, you have to explain where it is going. It is not improving the lives of Afghans, it is spreading. When people talking about medieval attitudes, this government that we have backed has passed a law recently, the law which actually allows certain degrees of rape in marriage. This is the kind of medieval attitude that comes from the government that we are supporting.

Eddie Mair:

Let's go to the audience then, on this question of 'what is the mission'.

Audience question 1:

I wanted to make two points. One of the reasons for the shift of public opinion in the UK is that in the West, people tend to have short memory of the events. If there is a threat, then public opinion will go back to supporting the war. Let's not forget that after September 11, the majority of the moderate Muslims in Islamic countries were suppressed in the name of the war against terror. And there are no moderate Muslim activists in these countries. The young Muslims are quite susceptible to go back to this jihadist movements. If they find a place like Afghanistan. Afghanistan could be a dangerous place if we give it back to the insurgents.

The second point is the anti-war campaigners who are just fuelling the propaganda of the Taliban in the West; they are the voices of the Taliban in the West. I'm sorry that you cannot be representing the Afghan people, the women who are killed and executed in the football grounds, and the girls who could not go to school.

Lindsey German:

It's a very good point, and it would be worth remembering that only a third of girls go to school, even after eight years. We are not justifying the views of the Taliban, and we don't put across the propaganda of the Taliban. What we say is, the war is wrong. The Taliban have been strengthened by this war, not weakened by it. And that's what people seem to be missing. Let's be honest, the British and American governments have talked to the Taliban in the last year and will continue to do so again.

Audience question 2:

I'd like to ask Ambassador Vendrell and perhaps other panellists how you can win hearts and minds when you'll never have enough troops to hold the ground? Estimates are 500,000 are needed. And when there isn't a government that is capable of taking over and owning the development that we speak of?

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I think in answer to that, I don't think we have an unlimited time to set things right. I do think that we probably have a year, year and a half left before our own public and the Afghan public demand that we withdraw. This year, what we need to do is insist that the government in Afghanistan changes its approach, that it fights corruption and impunity and that it gives some hope to the Afghans that things are going to change again. If that doesn't happen within a year, I think we've had it.

Eddie Mair:

I want to move onto another important topic that's been touched upon and that's the presidential election. Buster Howes, how corrupt was it?

Brigadier Buster Howes:

I think it was disappointingly so. But this was the first election which the Afghan people have conducted on their own. The ones conducted hitherto were conducted by the United Nations, albeit this one was externally moderated. It's taken us quite a long time to reach a semblance of democracy in this country. This was a faltering step, but nevertheless a profoundly significant one. So, yes, there was corruption, yes, it wasn't perfect, yes, it's not Berkshire. But we're fighting for our own security.

Eric Joyce MP:

I can't imagine anything more flippant than telling us that Afghanistan isn't Berkshire. It so preposterously simplifies the issue, that's hardly any point in taking part in this.

Eddie Mair:

Buster Howes, do you regret saying that, and perhaps you want to rephrase it?

Brigadier Buster Howes:

No, I don't because I think there's a sense that we have set a completely unachievable bar. In other words, we went into Afghanistan perhaps naively and we're now embroiled in something which is sort of unresolvable. And we're trying to make some sort of perfect peace. The reality is that we're entirely pragmatic, and good enough is good enough.

Eric Joyce MP:

Good enough is that we say that Karzai needs to get 50 percent in the first round, so he rips off 10 to 20 percent of the vote and gets 55 percent... that's good enough for the Brigadier. Well, I tell you what, it's not good enough for me, and it's not good enough for anyone who thinks that we shouldn't be sending troops to die, ultimately for a president who's propped up by us.

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I think the Brigadier is toeing the government line; he has no option. And I sympathise with him! But let's face it, this election was paid for by the international community. 300 million dollars, that's what they cost. To have an

election that was scandalously fraudulent was something that was foreseeable, there should have been a Plan B to prevent this from happening or to do something about it. I think we will commit an enormous error if we allow the election and the results to be accepted as if nothing had happened.

Eddie Mair:

So what would you do?

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I would call for a roundtable conference of Afghan leaders, have a period of interim rule of a kind of national government, leading to parliamentary and presidential elections next year and a totally different scenario. Not with the same electoral commission, which is totally biased.

Lindsey German:

Can I go back to what the Brigadier said? I think it is a very serious problem, if we're told that the extra troops were sent in because of the election, we're there supposedly to be protecting democracy, and then we're told that it doesn't really matter. I don't regard Berkshire as particularly the acme of democracy, but surely we shouldn't have a cynical view which says that we have one kind of democracy which is okay here, but then to say that something much worse is okay for the Afghans, this just shows that there is not a clear aim. It leads to the very cynical idea that we're there because we're there and then we will end up exactly as we were with Vietnam, with more and more troops being brought in and then eventually they'll have to leave and nobody will understand why so many people had to die.

Eddie Mair:

John Mackinlay, I wonder what your views are on the election.

Dr John Mackinlay:

I'm with Eric. I think that when you have a 56 percent against a campaign in a country, an election adds to that weight and then you have a very difficult position.

Audience question 3:

Did any of you in the panel really think you were going to get a perfect democracy? If you look at elections around the world in the last couple years, the elections in Iran, Zimbabwe, Kenya... what exactly were you hoping for?

Eric Joyce MP:

If I may say, in the Congo, a place the size of Europe, which is a lot more difficult to run elections in than Afghanistan, actually, in each of those cases they were properly monitored and they were results that people could pretty much say 'well that's a pretty good stab in that part of the world'. What's astounded people in Afghanistan is the sheer nakedness of the corruption.

Audience question 4:

Lindsey German, you said that you were disgusted with the way the elections were run. I know you stated that you thought this mission was impossible, but I'm not sure if you stated that you want to withdraw from Afghanistan. If you do want to withdraw from Afghanistan, how do you believe that elections would improve, or would there ever be elections again?

Lindsey German:

I do think it's possible to have free and fair elections in any country, I don't take the view that some countries are too backward to do this. The real thing is that this election was set up by the western governments as has been said. It was part of an aim of trying to stabilise the country more. The election was already delayed by George Bush last year because there were so many problems. I don't think it's our job to determine how the Afghans run their elections. I believe they should be a sovereign country, I don't believe the British troops should be there. We got rid of our empire a long time ago, in my view that was great progress. I don't like to see it coming back.

Audience question 5:

I think most people will agree the elections were pretty fraudulent, but I don't see what power we have to really change things. If we don't accept the elections, what do we do?

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

We, to a very large degree, are controlling Afghanistan. We have an enormous amount of money in the pipeline, we have soldiers, and I want to answer what kind of elections we did expect. How can any western government begin to accuse Zimbabwe or Kenya or Iran of running a bad election, if we are in cahoots with a government of a country that basically we were running the financial side of the election.

Eddie Mair:

I want to move onto a simple, beguiling question. What is a win in Afghanistan?

Dr John Mackinlay:

I think it's very hard to do a wide screen answer to that. For me, it's assessed when you go right down to the people who are very poor, living right out in the rural areas, have a degree of freedom and security and a certain amount of job opportunity. If you could achieve those things, then even in some measure you can leave Afghanistan saying you've improved it.

Eric Joyce MP:

I think a win is when we can say there's no greater chance of an attack from Al Qaeda, from Afghanistan than there is from Yemen or Sudan or Somalia. And then at that point, you get your troops out.

Eddie Mair:

What about democracy in the country?

Eric Joyce MP:

I think it's up to the Afghans. Ultimately, we have to help the Afghans in terms of international development for many years to come. But fundamentally, it's their problem if they don't want a democracy.

Eddie Mair:

Is it a selfish war then? This is a war Britain should wage for the safety of Britons back here?

Eric Joyce MP:

The fundamental point is that this is done for the safety of allies.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

I would take issue with the notion of winning. I think winning and losing in the conflicts that we face is unhelpful. What does success look like? Success looks very much like Mr Joyce has just described. We are in this for vital national interest. It is a hard-nosed self-interest which largely drives us. But in the longer term, we need to set conditions of human security and choice for the Afghans to not find themselves tyrannised into reverting into some ungoverned state.

Lindsey German:

I think the only win is ending the war. I don't believe a success is possible while the troops are there. Success surely would be the right of people to be equal, to live in a society which is safe for them and their children. They haven't had this for 30 years. They've already had their 30 years war, whatever the generals in this country now say about a future one. I do not believe that our troops are part of the solution. Of course, upon withdrawing there need to be discussions with neighbours, with other Afghans. I know many Afghans who want democracy, many Afghan women who have been campaigning. This has to be their choice. We cannot adopt this attitude that somehow we know best, we have enough problems with our own democracy.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

Under what conditions do you think the application of force would be justified?
Is there ever utility in military force?

Lindsey German:

I think there are very few cases, particularly of the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, which have been in any way successful. They talk about humanitarian intervention, but when you look at it, Tony Blair said in 2001 that they would not walk away, but they did. There may be utility in military force, but not in intervening in somebody else's country which hasn't attacked you.

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I want to take issue with Mr Joyce and the Brigadier, in the sense that I think it's terrible when people say that it's up to the Afghans to decide their form of government. Of course it's up to the Afghans. But have they ever been given a chance to choose? After 2001, the Americans but also the Europeans, we backed the warlords. We have supported a weak and corrupt government. It's like saying the people of Zimbabwe might not want anything better. Of course they want something better, but they are stuck with a tyrant.

Eric Joyce MP:

It's not quite what I mean. Fundamentally I agree. We need another election next year, and so forth. General Stanley McChrystal has just delivered a report, not to the UN or the EU, he will make the decision and then other countries will have to decide to what extent they'll go along with that decision. In Britain's case, we have to be very cautious that we don't just say, alright sir, without reflecting on our own self-interest. I've never heard an argument that is distinct in our own self-interest.

Dr John Mackinlay:

Brigadier, if this is purely a selfish national intervention, wouldn't you say therefore where security is the main aim, that operational primacy should go to the Home Office campaign in this country and that the operational task should be to secure our population here? And then when that is done, go to your expeditionary force?

Brigadier Buster Howes:

I'm not sure that there's necessarily a distinction and my sense is that both those activities are going on in parallel. All levers of state are being applied.

Eddie Mair:

I believe we have Patrick Hennessey in the audience.

Patrick Hennessey:

We've been speaking about national security in the very limited terms of the current threat faced by global Islamic terrorism. I wonder if any of the panel

would agree that national security in a wider future scenario is bolstered by a continued, very effective working relationship with the Americans. A relationship which our current effort in Afghanistan has strengthened, where we've been wobbly and that's deteriorated that relationship.

Eric Joyce MP:

The future of the UK I think is more closely aligned with what should be a coherent European Security and Defence policy. That's where we sit. We sit on the other side of the Atlantic. We have a relationship with the US where they tell us what to do and we do it. All other European countries know what their population wants and they have a plan that represents their national self-interest. We don't, and we don't have a particularly special relationship with the US. The UK's place in the world order isn't where most people in the UK seem to think it is. Nor is the EU's, because we haven't made enough effort to make a common defence policy.

Dr John Mackinlay:

I would say that that is a very Cold War characterisation of the special relationship, and we've moved beyond that. Do we have the same security interests at the Americans now? Our geography is totally different and we have a population that is connected to that area, and they probably do not have.

Patrick Hennessey:

It's optimistic that a common European Defence policy would work as coherently as a strategy would with the Americans. The vast majority of soldiers I fought alongside would much rather fight as part of a bilateral force with American than a crazy mishmash of Europeans who aren't pulling their weight.

Dr John Mackinlay:

We're talking about a European problem. Do you see the Americans coming to Europe to sort out our security problems, like they did in Kosovo?

Eddie Mair:

I'll leave your question hanging because we can't keep asking the audience. I know there are some soldiers in the audience. I wonder if you could respond to this question of how we know we've won in Afghanistan.

Audience question 6:

I think we've gone slightly off piste from the original question, which is 'is this mission impossible?' I'd like to put a question to Eric Joyce. Two of the fundamental principles of counter-insurgency warfare, which is really what we're engaged in now, are a unified cross-government approach and sufficient troop numbers that we can provide an enduring protection to the population. Do you think the Labour government is unified in the approach to Afghanistan? If we want to increase troop numbers, why has Labour MP Eric Joyce MP acted on military commanders' advice in the past? My concern is that the military will get labelled with answering this question when we may well be having our conditions restricted by others.

Eric Joyce MP:

That's the sort of question you ask a minister, not a guy who just resigned as a PPS last month. My honest opinion is that I'm perfectly happy that Labour is perfectly competent on defence, as competent or more than the Tories. If you look through the prism of Britain as somehow in charge of Afghanistan, and you just mentioned military principles... these decisions aren't made by Britain, they're made by Obama and American generals. The only thing that matters is General Stanley McChrystal's report. There's little point about talking about that kind of stuff, you're talking in theory about an allied effort, but the reality is that it's the Americans in charge.

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I do think that the UK would be more successful in having its own policy if it tried to lead the Europeans and getting the Europeans to agree on a common position, and then going to the US and trying to change its mind. Instead I fear that the approach is bilaterally to try and change the views of the Americans.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

My sense is that on a daily basis it does work. They are amenable to argument if it's coherent and carefully thought through. We do influence the American position. I'm surprised you paint such a binary position of it. We engage at every level with the Americans.

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

I suspect that you influence them for 10 minutes.

Lindsey German:

Everybody knows that if Obama sends more troops, so will the British.

Eddie Mair:

Coherent and carefully thought through arguments. We're almost out of time and I'd like to hear closing remarks from everyone on our panel.

Ambassador Francesc Vendrell:

Well I want to emphasise that this should not be seen as the end game. I think that it is possible for as long as we do that quickly and we show enough courage to develop a government in Afghanistan that is trusted by its own citizens, has the respect of the citizens, that will fight against corruption. I think, given the enormous amount of effort that the international community is putting, it should be possible for us to say this. This is at the same time what the Afghan people want. So, this will be the best way, in addition to the military effort, to try and change the defeatist views of British public, the European public, and actually the Afghan public. The Afghan public's concerns about our presence in Afghanistan are precisely the same as the Europeans.

Lindsey German:

I think that to call these views defeatist is simply wrong. I think the majority of people in all these countries have a very sober assessment of exactly how the war on terror has failed, not just in Afghanistan but in Iraq as well. People are very sceptical about losing more lives, both of their own soldiers but also of the many thousands of Afghans who have died or are refugees, on the

basis of a war which nobody understands. If it's there to protect a corrupt government, and everybody knew the Karzai government was corrupt before this election took place. We have to answer the question of what the war was for. I believe it's there, George Bush went to war in 2001 even though the Taliban offered to give up Bin Laden before the war started, I'm sorry that is true.

Brigadier Buster Howes:

Francesc's comments, soberest of assessments and defeatists views, strikes a chord. I would give a soldier's answer. I will say that the resolve of Tommy Atkins, sometimes fighting a 12 hour running battle against the Taliban, remains strong. Our soldiers are convinced of the rightness of what they're doing. Their commitment shines out of every news report that you see. They will not lose this war. But a failure of British will and support will lose it for them.

Eric Joyce MP:

Yes, I think that President Obama is faced with a decision now which could decide whether he's there for one term or two. We have to make our own decision based on our own national interest. We must not simply follow on because President Obama thinks one course is the best. We have to reflect on what our European allies are doing, and we certainly have to celebrate everything that our troops do on the ground, but we have to listen to public opinion, and we haven't done that.

Dr John Mackinlay:

I don't agree with that. I think what's happening is tragic. I think people watching it must be involved and upset emotionally. The bottom line is that our national interest has got to be the guiding measure.

Eddie Mair:

Thank you all for taking part and thanks to our audience at Chatham House.