

**Press conference**  
**by the Commander of the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan**  
**General John W. Nicholson**

*09 November 2017*

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**Moderator:** Okay, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm very happy to introduce General Nicholson, Commander of NATO's Resolute Support Mission. He will say a few words, make a brief opening statement, and then take some questions. General.

General John W. Nicholson (Commander, Resolute Support Mission): Thanks, Pierce. And thanks to all of you for joining us today. I know you've heard from both the Secretary General and the Secretary of Defence prior to my time with you. So I'll keep my remarks brief then we'll get right into the questions. But I do want to touch upon a few points.

So we're moving ahead with Unity of Effort as we go forward from here. A stable Afghanistan is in everyone's interest, and it will contribute to regional stability. The cost of failure in Afghanistan would be great and would be felt worldwide. A secure Afghanistan is key to deterring terrorist activity and migration. And so the fact that a NATO-led coalition that involves 39 nations is working to accomplish this is an imperative for success.

As partners in this coalition, we have all come together here to review our work, and we're moving forward together. When you look at the new U.S. South Asia strategy, coupled with the NATO Warsaw commitments, you see that we have a renewed commitment to Afghanistan, and this collective strategy is guided by conditions on the ground, not timelines.

The bottom line is that the Taliban cannot win. They must reconcile. And in 2017 we helped the Afghans to increase military pressure with some increase in train, advise, assist capacity and air power. But as you're aware, and as I said yesterday to some of you, we fought in 2017 at a lower level of capability. So we welcome the increases that have... that are being made by many of our allies. It's especially impressive that two dozen nations have committed to increasing their force levels, and of course those numbers will continue to be worked out as the nations go through their own internal political decision-making cycles, and that is all brought together with the Alliance, but it's good news as we see these increases arrival in the coming year.

So this year we saw some changes in how the Afghans fought on the battlefield. They were on the offensive in up to six core areas at a time. And this enabled them to achieve some local tactical successes in places like Helmand, Kandahar, Urozgan, and Kunduz. We saw the enemy shift after their failure to take any provincial capital shift to districts, an attempt to maintain their relevance through suicide attacks. I will point out that this is a sign of failure, the fact that they had to shift from trying to seize and hold new terrain to attempting to just inflict casualties to maintain relevance in their eyes. These recent spate of attacks that

occurred in the last three weeks were an attempt by the Taliban at the end of the season to prove that they were still present and still capable of inflicting casualties. Sadly, the majority of these casualties were civilians and were not Security Forces.

We'll work with our Afghan partners through the winter to maintain pressure on the enemy, even as they regenerate and prepare for the spring. Again, the Taliban will not be able to win in the face of this increased military pressure, this increased diplomatic pressure on the external enablers, and the increased social pressure that will come with the ballot box as elections are held over the next two years. So part of the U.S. South Asia policy and certainly NATO's commitment is to a viable peace process, and what we heard today from the ministers was strong commitment to that end.

So this is all extremely encouraging. Again, to wrap this up, the combination of this U.S. South Asia policy, the Warsaw Summit commitments, the increasing capabilities of the Afghan Security Forces, the willing partnership we have with the Afghan government, and this renewed pressure on external enablement will move us in the right direction, which is a peace process to bring about a political solution to this conflict.

So today's meeting and the increased troop commitments that we heard about from our NATO partners, two dozen nations agreeing or committing to increases, will maintain the momentum that we need going forward.

Our coalition is proving the enemy's theory of victory wrong. They believe that they would win because NATO and particularly the U.S. lack the political will. That has been proven wrong by the Warsaw Summit commitments and the U.S. South Asia policy, and indeed by what you saw here today with two dozen nations recommitting to Afghanistan.

So with that I'll open it up to questions.

**Setara Hassan (Zan TV):** Speaking Setara Hassan from Zan TV, Afghanistan. I would like to ask... because I find it very contradictory that we are talking peace and reconciliation process with the Taliban. And we think we are about to win, so they have to now reconcile. At the same time we are also talking about protecting women's rights. So how are you going to ensure that we have reconciled and the Taliban would not take over what we have accomplished or the women of Afghanistan accomplished through the 16 years, and would not take that away from them? Thank you.

**General John W. Nicholson:** Right. So we are fighting and talking at the same time. And we're gonna continue to do that. But we're also messaging the enemy that they cannot win. So the sooner they choose the path of peace, lay down their weapons and rejoin society, the better for everyone. They'll stop bringing hardship on the Afghan people. They themselves and their families can live in peace and the whole country would prosper from this. So we want to ensure that even as we fight, even as we increase military pressure, even as we increase pressure on the enablers of the terrorists, even as we increase social pressure inside the country that the door is always open for a conversation about peace. Some will walk through it; some won't. And their choices are simple: either reconcile or face irrelevance or death. And so these are their choices.

To this point, the conversation about peace has always included respect for the Afghan constitution and the human rights provisions of that constitution, which address the things that you're concerned about. And I would also add that given the way that the coalition has been committed in Afghanistan for now 16 years, I don't think you're going to see any one in this coalition walk away from those basic constitutional provisions that we've all supported for this entire war.

**Moderator:** Yes, please.

**Abdullah Azada Khenjani (One TV):** Thank you, General. This is Abdullah, and I'm an Afghan journalist from One TV. We do see increasing pressures on Pakistan after President Trump announce his new policy for Afghanistan and South Asia. But in practice, I'm sure you are in a deep conversation with Pakistani government and establishment and the military leadership. Do you see a change in their behaviour yet or it's the same as it was?

**General John W. Nicholson:** No, I haven't seen any change yet in their behaviour. But as you cited, Abdullah, you've heard the public statements from President Trump, from Secretary Mattis, from Chairman Dunford, from Secretary Tillerson. So we're engaging at the very highest levels with the Pakistanis to work together with them against these terrorists that are undermining the stability of the entire region. And as we all know, Pakistan has fought hard and suffered heavily against those terrorists focused on its government, and now we're asking them to focus on the terrorists that are attacking Afghanistan and that are attacking the coalition. And so these are the... this is the dialogue we're having with Pakistan. The United States has been very clear about the direction we want to go. And we hope to see some change in the coming weeks and months, and as Secretary Mattis said earlier today, there'll be incentives if they work with us and disincentives if they don't.

**Moderator:** Yes, please.

**Sharif Hassanyar (Ariana TV):** Thank you very much. This is Sharif from Ariana TV. Some Afghan officials, military officials and civilian officials claim that Russia is supporting Taliban. Have you seen any evidence that Russia is supporting Taliban?

**General John W. Nicholson:** Yeah, I think that... as this has been in the news quite a bit. Number one, I'd say we've seen evidence of Russia supporting Taliban by lending them political legitimacy, by claiming through their narrative that the Taliban are successful against Daesh, more successful than the government against Daesh. This is false. The government and the U.S. counter terrorism forces are the ones that are fighting ISIS and the ones that are restricting ISIS's movements, killing its imers(sp), killing its fighters, and squeezing their so-called caliphate into the mountains of southern Angahar. The proof of this is in the fact that we have seen no significant migration of Daesh fighters from Syria to Afghanistan, and we won't. Because of the pressure being put on ISIS by the Afghan Special Forces and the U.S. Special Operations Forces we are working hard to ensure that there is not a migration of these fighters. This is fundamental to this false narrative from Russia. So Russia paints a picture of ISIS spilling over into Central Asia, and this is the justification for what support they lend to the Taliban. And what we're saying is that Afghanistan and the United States are fighting Russia's fight for them.

We are fighting the terrorists in Afghanistan. And what they need to be doing is supporting the Afghan government in its fight against these terrorists, and by this way they can secure their own interests. I would also add that there's areas of mutual interests between Russia and the coalition in Afghanistan. Counter narcotics. Narcotics kill tens of thousands of Russian citizens every year. Counter terrorism. Again, I've spoken to that. And also the desire for peace and stability in the region. So these are three areas that we hope to work with the Russians on going forward, and NATO has committed to that through a number of fora. They had the NATO-Russia council that met recently to discuss some of these issues. There was a delegation from Russia that recently visited Kabul. So we hope that going into the future that neighbours and other nations like Russia will work with us and the international community. And again, you've got over 39 nations now committed to helping in Afghanistan. We hope to see Russia work with us towards our common interests.

**Moderator:** Yes, please, in the front row.

**Nasir Maimanagy (Radio Salam Watandar):** Thank you. This is Nasir Maimanagy from Salam Watandar. Here in NATO there is talk of adaptability. How quick are Afghans to adapt to the new tactics that are employed by the Taliban? Because recently we've been seeing some nasty attacks that are created by the Taliban.

**General John W. Nicholson:** Yeah, I think that the Afghan Forces are extremely adaptable, and part of this, let me just take a minute to talk about Afghanistan, as you all well know, the majority of the population is under the age of 27, something like 70 per cent of the population. We're seeing an army that's achieving a generational change in the leadership of the Afghan military. You're gonna speak later today with Minister Bahrami. He is the personification of this change. When President Ghani changed out the leadership in May of the army, he lowered the average age by 10 years of the corps commanders. Okay?

So what we're doing is reaching into that next generation. This generation is educated, committed, energetic. They want a better future. So this is... these are the change agents that are going to take Afghanistan forward and the ones that are adapting. Let's talk about adaptability. This is an army now that has developed the best special operations force in the region. If you're to go out and visit with the Afghan commandos, the special police units, these units are the best in the region. And you would see almost no difference between them and the special operating forces of other nations. You know, sadly we had... we've had some attacks inside Kabul. At every one of those attacks you will see the special police unit, II, appears on the scene, and more often than not reduces the situation, kills the terrorist, protects individuals, as they did at Shamsad TV just this week. As soon as they appear the Taliban and the terrorists lose.

So this is the quality we're talking about. So this is a form of adaptability. Another example would be the Air Force. We have Afghan pilots who since we first flew our first combat sortie of the A-29 aircraft last year have dramatically increased the use of Afghan air power. And then these... this air is controlled by Afghan tactical air controllers on the ground. We have our first four Black Hawk helicopters have arrived in Afghanistan. Afghan pilots are being trained on the Black Hawk helicopter. So they're extremely adaptable to the technologies necessary to go forward, and to the tactics of the enemy.

So part of this is again, getting this younger generation of leaders. Another example I'd use is General Ahmadzai who's the commander of the 215th Corps in Helmand. So since he has taken leadership of that corps they've actually gone on the offensive in Helmand, and retaken districts like Nawa that had been in enemy hands for two years. And this is a result of his leadership and his ability to bring together the security forces in that area to fight extremely well.

So I'd say we have many examples, many success stories inside the Afghan Security Forces of adaptability and competence. And so it's those stories that give me the confidence to know that they are going to be successful, and that the Taliban cannot win in the face of these forces.

**Moderator:** Yes, please.

**Naim Taher Qaderi (Mitra TV):** Mr. General, you talked about reconciliation. I'm Taher from Mitra TV from Afghanistan. You talked about reconciliation with the Taliban.

**General John W. Nicholson:** Yeah.

**Naim Taher Qaderi:** But unfortunately over the last few years that we can see, you know, the years, an increase of attacks on the civilians. Each time we talked about... we talk about reconciliation they attack more mosques, they attack schools, restaurants, airport, whoever they see. So unfortunately the Taliban actually perceive this kind of reconciliation as, in their own terms as begging. So in your statements, I mean we can clearly see that they don't really obey to any sort of, you know, that way of narrative.

**General John W. Nicholson:** Right.

**Naim Taher Qaderi:** So my question is, is there like, you know, a plan B in case of they don't really abide by that rule, which they haven't so far? Is there really a strict and firm stance against them going to be taken?

**General John W. Nicholson:** Right. Thanks, Taher. So the four-year roadmap that President Ghani designed and put out last year lays out a process by which the government expands control over the population and the territory of the country. So this is the base plan, which drives the enemy to either reconcile or face irrelevance. And so the point here is with the doubling of the commandos and the tripling of the Air Force, and with the addition of NATO and U.S. advisors... the U.S. advisors going down to the brigade and the combat level. This will increase the pressure on the enemy, and over the next two years it will enable the Afghan Forces to expand control of the country to 80 per cent. So what this will have the effect of is driving the enemy out of those areas that are contested right now, about a third of the country, and into more remote areas where frankly they'll be irrelevant. And so their choices are either to reconcile or live in irrelevance in less than 10 per cent of the country, or frankly to die. And this is what they face.

With the pressure on their sanctuaries and Pakistan, they will be put in really a position of having to return to Afghanistan and face one of these three choices. I'm very encouraged by the social outreach we see is occurring. When I visit Kandahar and meet with many of the tribal leaders there, many of whom have members of their tribes in the Taliban, they say they

are engaged in a dialogue. The Taliban are tired of war. They're disappointed with their leadership. Remember, their leadership is turning mainly to criminal activity. So the Taliban has turned into an organization that profits from the drug trade, and this is one of the motivations that their leaders have for continuing the fight. And they're very happy to send out these young men to die while they profit from the narcotics trafficking, the illegal mining, the extortion networks, the kidnapping.

This is what the Taliban have become. And so as this pressure is applied in the country, those young people that are joining the Taliban will have a choice to make as well.

I think to your point though, there needs to be a conversation, a social outreach, within Afghanistan with the Taliban. And so this is an Afghan conversation. It's not one that I'm involved in, but this needs to occur in terms of bringing them in, convincing them of what the future looks like and show them how their future would be better by joining society and not remaining on the outside. So it's an extremely important issue, and there does have to be a bit of social mobilization, if you will, that needs to occur on the peace effort. And we are beginning to see some signs of it with the peaces around the country. Thank you.

**Moderator:** We have time for one more question.

**Question:** Thank you very much. General, you said that you expected Russia to work together with you are pushing the common interests. How do you think this is possible, taking into consideration NATO's decision to suspend all practical cooperation with Russia and with Afghanistan between other issues? Thank you.

**General John W. Nicholson:** Yeah. Thank you for the question. So you know, international relations of course are very complex. There's areas where we share common interests and areas where our interests will differ. I think Afghanistan is one of those areas in the three categories I mentioned: counter narcotics, counter terrorism, and peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan where we share interests with Russia. And so our hope would be that we can work with Russia to secure our common interests. This would only be good for all of us, a greater stability in Central Asia. It would reduce migration. It would reduce the potential for terrorists emanating from the region, and it could benefit all nations economically, and it certainly would be better for the Afghan people who have suffered enough after four decades of war.

So, I think it is possible to compartment certain issues, and I would hope that that can happen, you know, with Russia and NATO, working together on what's best for the future of Afghanistan. Thank you.

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