Any Agreement on Residual U.S. Force in Afghanistan Based on Conditions – Not Trust – of Taliban, Joint Chiefs Chairman Says

A plan for an 8,600-person residual U.S. force in Afghanistan after any peace agreement came from military leadership – not President Trump – and such an agreement must be based on conditions and not on trust in the Taliban or the belief that they could prevent other extremists from planning an attack on America, the nation's top military officer said.

The purpose of the current U.S.-Taliban negotiations "is to deliver inter-Afghan deliberations" that will establish a path to a future political arrangement. And, "one thing we've all been clear on is any agreement will be conditions-based," Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said before the Council on Foreign Relations on Sept. 5. "We have very specific conditions, and if they are not met, my assumption is the negotiations will run down."

> *"One thing we've all been clear on is any agreement will be conditions-based."*
>
> *Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs*

of Staff

The primary conditions for an agreement are that it would reduce the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan to a level that the Afghan security forces could handle, while U.S. and coalition forces deal with the extremist elements that would like to attack America, and it would set up negotiations between the Taliban and the government in Kabul on Afghanistan's political future, Dunford said.

In response to questions, Dunford said: "The number of 8,600 that the president has referred to was a number that was generated by military leadership," including the U.S. commanders in Afghanistan and Central Command.

"No advice I've provided is founded on trust in the Taliban … nor based on the assumption that the Taliban can protect us from over 20 extremist groups in South Asia," he emphasized. "The level of violence and extremism in South Asia is inextricably linked to the level of the insurgency in Afghanistan" and if it "can be reduced, then the Afghan security forces and the U.S. and coalition forces left can focus on counter-terrorism not the insurgency."

Afghanistan must be viewed "in context of the overall national defense strategy," Dunford said. "We need a fiscally, politically and militarily sustainable strategy against violent extremism," which will remain a

threat, so the military can focus its attention and resources on the primary
threat of great power competition with Russia and China, he added.

“Clearly, China and Russia are the benchmark against which we measure our strategy, how we think about risk and allocate resources for the
forces today,” Dunford said. But they also “have to be able to deal with the
threats we have today – violent extremism – at the same time we shift
sufficient resources to ensure we maintain the competitive advantage we have
today well into the future.”

Crafting a defense budget means making choices, he noted. “First and foremost, we must protect cyber, space, electronic warfare, the maritime capabilities … to make us more functional in the context of great power competition.” Dunford cited the growing defense capabilities of China and the aggressive efforts by Russian President Vladimir Putin to re-establish Russia as a major world player.

Asked about efforts to renew the U.S.-Russian New Start nuclear limitation treaty, Dunford said he “would be in favor of extending the agreement, providing if all the parties would follow the agreement.” But he noted it was “hard to say that” in wake of Russia’s violations of the INF treaty.