

Episode 151: Shideler Bryen

Speaker 1 ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to the Bill Walton Show, featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists and thinkers. Fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics and human flourishing. Interesting people, interesting things.

William Walton ([00:24](#)):

Welcome to the Bill Walton Show. I'm Bill Walton.

William Walton ([00:30](#)):

Afghanistan, where to begin. For most of us Afghanistan had largely slipped from our radar screen after several years of relative quiet and stability. Donald Trump had talked about leaving but it wasn't clear whether that was actually going to happen and then overnight it seems, Joe Biden orders America's immediate exit from the country and chaos ensues. I started into creating a list of issues which I normally do for these shows that we want to talk about and the list has now run to six pages. And so instead of me going through this, I decided to cut to the chase and talk to some real experts who've been following this for years and I hope and will give us some insights into how we got here, where we are and where we think this is going. Dr. Dr. Stephen Bryen has 50 years of experience in national security and again, I came to not a six page list but a 16 page list of achievements. Stephen, could you give us a quick.

Stephen Bryen ([01:37](#)):

I'll try. I'll do it really quickly. I started out as a professor of political science at Lehigh University, came to Washington and joined the foreign relations committee staff. I was the director of the near east subcommittee of the foreign relations committee. And later on, I went to the Defense Department where I was the deputy under secretary of defense and founder and director of the Defense Technology Security Administration. And after I left government, that's about 20 years worth, I went into the private sector and among other things, I was the president of a very large multinational company here in Washington, DC.

William Walton ([02:18](#)):

Welcome.

Stephen Bryen ([02:19](#)):

Thank you.

William Walton ([02:19](#)):

I can't wait to dig into this with you.

Stephen Bryen ([02:22](#)):

I don't want to give you any more propaganda.

William Walton ([02:25](#)):

Kyle Shideler is the director and senior analyst for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism and since this issue with the Afghanistan bears not just in our national security abroad but here at home, thought, you'd have an incredible insight into this. Kyle, what's a bit of your background?

Kyle Shideler ([02:44](#)):

I've been involved in studying terrorist and insurgent ideologies, really for about a little more than a decade. I got started at a nonprofit that did helping Jewish students deal with anti-Semitism on college campuses. A lot of which was coming out of Islamist organizations in the United States. I specialized in Islamist organizations in the US and then globally. How they interact with terrorist groups, what their agenda is, how they seek to foment their ideology.

William Walton ([03:24](#)):

Okay. Thank you. Stephen, could you frame this for us? Because this was, we talked about this, seems to fan out in billions of different directions.

Stephen Bryen ([03:33](#)):

With Afghanistan I think there are two major questions. The first is why did we precipitously leave? What was behind it? And the second question which I think is fascinating is that when President Trump had proposed withdrawing US troops, the US military told him that was a bad idea. Don't do it. When Mr. Biden did it or announced it or even before he announced it, there wasn't a peep or a boo from the Pentagon saying you shouldn't do it. In fact, they embraced it. It's strange. It seems to me, this is very strange and one wonders what's going on.

William Walton ([04:16](#)):

As I understand it he had, Austin wasn't defense secretary, but all the chief of staffs, when Trump was president says, "You can't do it."

Stephen Bryen ([04:27](#)):

That's right.

William Walton ([04:28](#)):

And then he announced, Biden says, "I'm going to do it." And they just fold.

Stephen Bryen ([04:32](#)):

And then Biden has the audacity to blame Trump for something he never did. And was advised not to do because of the implications of what would happen. Which is exactly what happened.

William Walton ([04:44](#)):

Kyle, what's your take?

Kyle Shideler ([04:46](#)):

No, I think that's right. It is truly remarkable that you had a administrative state, all of the elements of the Department of Defense, the State Department who were vociferously against exit, all of a sudden

turn around and execute the most incompetent evacuation imaginable. When you had Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Mark Milley, sitting there telling congressmen that Bagram Airbase was not tactically necessary. You don't have to be a long time military practitioner to know, well the more airstrips you have getting people out, the faster you can get them out. And that was all just ignored. And it is really fascinating that either the Biden administration had the ability to simply steamroll the administrative state or they did not see it as their role to get in the way of this president. Whereas they did see that they a role to prevent the Trump administration from executing policy, which I think is very curious.

William Walton ([06:03](#)):

Bagram Airbase, it seems to me now I'm new to this issue but you look at Afghanistan on a map and you've got Pakistan, Iran, the Stans, the Russian piece, India's claiming a little bit through Pakistan, China, it's got a 57 mile border with Afghanistan. And so you've got four nuclear powers surrounding Afghanistan. And one want to be nuclear power with Iran.

Stephen Bryen ([06:33](#)):

Maybe they are.

William Walton ([06:35](#)):

Maybe they are already.

Stephen Bryen ([06:38](#)):

I'm not prepared to say they are not well.

William Walton ([06:41](#)):

Well that's on our long list of where to go with it. As you look at that, you think, well gee, wouldn't, we want to have a presence there? Let's forget about country building. Remember we went in 20 years ago and I think we were pretty smart. We aligned with was the Northern.

Kyle Shideler ([06:58](#)):

Northern Alliance.

William Walton ([06:59](#)):

Northern Alliance and we got all the tribes working together. They hated the Taliban and we won. And at that point we probably just should have said, "Okay, well, we've won," and maybe keep an airbase there but then stop. But instead we started country building.

Stephen Bryen ([07:13](#)):

That's right. That seems to be our Achilles heel. We've tried it not only in Afghanistan, we tried it in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, these places.

William Walton ([07:24](#)):

Iraq.

Stephen Bryen ([07:25](#)):

Iraq. And it's failed in every case. Maybe we should learn a lesson.

Kyle Shideler ([07:31](#)):

And not only that, but the kind of country we were trying to build where it would have been maybe one thing to say to the biggest warlord that we worked with, "Okay. Now you're in charge. Don't make us come back here." It's another thing to spend \$800 million on gender studies over the course of 20 years because you want to turn Afghanistan a place which hasn't even managed monarchy, into a modern liberal democracy.

William Walton ([08:04](#)):

Wait. \$800 million?

Kyle Shideler ([08:06](#)):

I think it was 716 million.

William Walton ([08:07](#)):

Okay, we can round up.

Kyle Shideler ([08:11](#)):

About that, yeah.

William Walton ([08:12](#)):

Really? Gender studies in Afghanistan.

Stephen Bryen ([08:15](#)):

Everett Dirksen used to say a 100 million here, a 100 billion there. Pretty soon you're talking about real money.

William Walton ([08:22](#)):

But even, we're so out of touch with their culture, didn't the US State Department run a flag celebrating Pride Day what, a couple months ago?

Stephen Bryen ([08:33](#)):

That's right. Over the embassy in Kabul.

William Walton ([08:35](#)):

And Taliban's pretty much declared that they're going to run the country based on Sharia law. And what does Sharia law mean for women?

Stephen Bryen ([08:44](#)):

It means that they will mind their place and wear their burkas and stay out of the way. If they want to stay alive or not be whipped in public or some other humiliation.

William Walton ([08:58](#)):

The implications for Americans having suffered through 20 years of Afghanistan and the people and the men and women who served in Afghanistan are terrible. I think I heard this morning that the Veterans Affairs suicide hotline has had 35,000 calls in the last 60 days.

Stephen Bryen ([09:17](#)):

There's deep distress in the veterans community right now. My daughter is one of them.

William Walton ([09:26](#)):

Where does your daughter serve?

Stephen Bryen ([09:27](#)):

She served in Iraq. She was a lieutenant colonel, two tours. One of which ended her military career. But she's also a practicing psychologist and she is deeply concerned about veterans. She gets thousands of calls now all the time. It's people they're terribly upset because if we had been actually defeated, we lost on the battlefield that's one thing but to run away is another. And these are people, lives were lost, many wounded, many thousands of wounded. People who sacrificed themselves in these situations and now we run away. It's very hard for them to take that on mentally. It's very disturbing for them. And I understand that. My daughter understands that. It's a terrible thing.

William Walton ([10:24](#)):

Kyle, do you know some?

Kyle Shideler ([10:26](#)):

I know a number of veterans that fought both in Afghanistan and Iraq and we talk a lot about post traumatic stress but one of the most traumatic things that can happen is you can lose a war and you can sort of lose a war post facto. A lot of these guys have served. They went over there, they did their time. They did an honorable job. In a lot of cases, they did a successful job.

Stephen Bryen ([10:51](#)):

And they were heroes. Let's be honest about it. These were very courageous people.

Kyle Shideler ([10:55](#)):

And then to have the reason for having done all those things taken away from you after the fact is very traumatic.

Stephen Bryen ([11:05](#)):

Well, Obama did it Iraq, didn't he? He pulled us out. Wasn't as messy as this Afghanistan thing for us, it was messy for the Iraqis.

William Walton ([11:15](#)):

It's one thing for Biden to do it but to have Lloyd Austin who had been a general to have Millie do it and all the other chiefs of staff who presumably are have an emotional connection and leadership responsibility for those who serve under them, how can you do this to your own people?

Stephen Bryen ([11:34](#)):

They're gutless wonders aren't they? To put it bluntly. It's awful to think that. Look, if they had objected and the president says, "I don't care. You're going to do this, civilians rule." Okay, I would understand that. But there's no evidence that ever happened. In fact, the reverse. The head of CENTCOM is saying, "Oh, well the Taliban were our counterparts. We've worked very well with them."

Kyle Shideler ([12:03](#)):

There was that Washington Post article where apparently General McKenzie talked with the Taliban and agreed that the Taliban would be allowed to provide security in Kabul and we would provide security for the airport. If that Washington Post article is correct, the Taliban offered to allow us to control security in Kabul and we said no, which means all of the Taliban checkpoints, all of the problems that we had getting Americans and special immigrant visa holders through those checkpoints to get to the airport, all of those were a self own. They were an own goal because we could have provided that security and made sure that they got through. We chose not to.

Stephen Bryen ([12:43](#)):

Well, let's all get back to the real fundamental point. The real fundamental point is that the US cut a deal with the Taliban secretly. Secretly, that they would turn over control of everything to them even before the battles were lost. In early July, we started pulling out of bases. By July 3rd, I think that's the right date, we were out of seven bases, including Bagram. And by the end, we were out of 15 bases. We just left. And this was part of the deal. It had to be. As we ferreted out people and removed ourselves, leaving behind billions of dollars of equipment and everything else.

Stephen Bryen ([13:28](#)):

I think that the real story, and by the way, today there was a transcript that was released between the conversation between President Biden and Ashraf Ghani, who was the president of Afghanistan.

William Walton ([13:46](#)):

Ashraf Ghani, continue.

Stephen Bryen ([13:49](#)):

And it's very interesting because Biden knew fully well that we were leaving. Ghani must've known by then. And there's a line in this which I think is really amazing where Biden says, "We will continue to provide close air support if we know what your plan is." Well, there's two things about that. His plan was to try and survive, of course but we couldn't provide close air support because we had no longer had any bases to provide it from and Biden knew that. What's going on here? It's a con job. It's a tap dance to try and make pretend that we are still talking to Ghani when in fact we were talking to the Taliban only.

Kyle Shideler ([14:38](#)):

Which we had been doing for years through the Taliban embassy in Qatar. We pushed the Afghan government, which we were supposedly backing out of the negotiations and negotiated solely with the Taliban for years.

Stephen Bryen ([14:53](#)):

Yeah. ostensibly because we couldn't get the Afghan government to agree to commit suicide. We just did it by ourselves.

William Walton ([15:02](#)):

Let me do a quick check. You're watching the Bill Walton Show. I'm here with Stephen Bryen and Kyle Shideler. And we're talking about sort of the stunning deception that went on and the lack of character that our senior leaders in the military seem to have exhibited, not seem, did. But I want to turn now to this president of Afghanistan who was last seen bundling \$169 million and getting on a plane. Did he actually have cash in a suitcase?

Stephen Bryen ([15:35](#)):

Cash money. The only question I have is what kind of money?

William Walton ([15:39](#)):

We put him in there and this was a Davos president if there ever was one. He gave Ted Talks, he'd written about how to save failed states. And this guy was big on the lecture tour. And we put him in. He was utterly unconnected with the tribal cultures of Afghanistan. In fact, in his Ted Talk, he said, "Well, Afghans don't really understand capital in terms of capital formation, they do understand cash." And he was referring about the, well he was one of them.

Kyle Shideler ([16:13](#)):

Apparently so, when he finally flew out on that helicopter.

William Walton ([16:17](#)):

I'm laughing, but the American people did not know a lot of all of this. Now with the Trump deal that he was talking about, people say it was a mistake for him to be talking with the Taliban. Was that a blunder?

Stephen Bryen ([16:31](#)):

A mistake for whom?

William Walton ([16:33](#)):

Trump. Donald Trump was negotiating with the Taliban.

Stephen Bryen ([16:36](#)):

Well my own personal view is he should not have. I think that was an error on his part but it's a big difference between talking to someone and giving away the shop and he didn't give away anything. And I think it's really strange. Even Mr. Biden's latest talk to the American people where he says that it's Trump's fault somehow. It wasn't Trump's fault. It was Biden's fault. It was Biden's decision from the start to the finish.

Kyle Shideler ([17:08](#)):

And I think Trump, we have to remember Trump inherited those negotiations. And one of the sticky things about Washington DC is that a lot of people in Washington DC think that peace processes and negotiations can go on forever. And I think Donald Trump came into office with the idea that

negotiations are to be won and you get what you wanted out of the negotiation and then you execute the deal. Which is not the Washington DC culture. And so he saw a negotiation taking place and said, "Okay, let's try to win it." And from what we understand, the Taliban didn't execute on certain requirements that the Trump deal had in place and so they essentially walked away.

William Walton ([17:55](#)):

There was no deal. This notion that somehow Biden inherited a deal with Trump had struck was wrong.

Stephen Bryen ([18:01](#)):

That's right. He didn't inherit anything other than a meeting place in Qatar.

Kyle Shideler ([18:08](#)):

Which is the another part of the Washington DC peace process culture, which is you have to adhere to deals that aren't struck. That aren't agreed to. He's laughing because he knows I'm right. That you have a deal on the table and you make an offer and the other side says no and then you go ahead and do what you offered to do anyway, which happens in DC all the time.

Stephen Bryen ([18:30](#)):

I think we should add that there was a lot of criticism in Washington and still is that the Afghan regime was pretty corrupt.

Kyle Shideler ([18:41](#)):

And it was.

Stephen Bryen ([18:41](#)):

And it was. There was no doubt about that. So was the Iraqi regime corrupt. This is just a fact of life, I think. But you don't make national security decisions based on corruption. At least I don't think you should. I think you make it on your national interest. What's your national interest here? And what's the best, from the point of view of cutting and running from Afghanistan, you have really harmed the US posture around the world. Nobody will trust us right now. Nobody should trust us right now. And that's evidence of it. And the more information that comes out that shows that this was, that our military didn't fight for it, they didn't want it, they were willing to go along with it. They were weak reeds, contemptuous in some ways, that really hurts us. That really hurts us everywhere. In the Middle East especially, in Asia certainly. That I think is a big price to pay but I think it was a fairly foolish and dangerous thing.

William Walton ([19:45](#)):

Kyle, who's been getting on the planes?

Kyle Shideler ([19:48](#)):

I wish I knew. The Biden administration has been extremely cagey about the question of who are we actually evacuating from Afghanistan. They like to cite these top numbers. The last one I saw was 125,000 about. And then they said, "Well, 7,000 of those."

William Walton ([20:08](#)):

A 125,000, is that a number you believe? Or do you?

Kyle Shideler ([20:11](#)):

That's a number I heard.

William Walton ([20:12](#)):

Okay. All right.

Kyle Shideler ([20:13](#)):

Whether I believe it's a top number or not, it's been quoted and of that, 7,000 were special immigrant visa holders and 5,000 about approximately were Americans.

William Walton ([20:24](#)):

What does that mean, special immigrant visa holder?

Kyle Shideler ([20:27](#)):

A special immigrant visa is for Iraq and Afghanistan, for individuals that were engaged in helping the US effort. This is the kind of person that most Americans think we should be helping, translators, government employees, those sorts of things, intelligence assets.

William Walton ([20:43](#)):

But I've heard that it's morphed into people like Uber drivers and caterers and all sorts of people.

Kyle Shideler ([20:48](#)):

It absolutely has. And then there's an expanded, I think it's called a P2 program, which is an even larger subset of people.

William Walton ([20:57](#)):

The Afghans, 66,000 Afghan soldiers died fighting along us.

Stephen Bryen ([21:03](#)):

Kyle's right.

William Walton ([21:04](#)):

What does this say about their sacrifice?

Stephen Bryen ([21:08](#)):

Well, they've been sold out. That's what it says. Totally sold out. Everyone said, "Well, they didn't fight. They didn't fight." But here you have an army that lost its air cover, which the US provided all along. The Afghan air force was pitifully poor so we provided the air cover, the close air support, the counterinsurgency capabilities. Secondly, their supplies were cut off because we provided the supplies. That disappeared. They realized they were just cut adrift and they had no help anymore. Their counterparts who were working with Americans and some from NATO, left. Just left in the night and

they didn't just leave and say goodbye. And we have to go home now. They left in the middle of the night.

William Walton ([21:58](#)):

Bagram was overnight.

Stephen Bryen ([21:59](#)):

Oh yeah. 3:00 o'clock in the morning.

William Walton ([22:01](#)):

Yeah. They'll just parted.

Stephen Bryen ([22:02](#)):

They didn't tell the other guys, the Afghan guards, they had no idea. They turned off the electricity. They yanked out the comms and the radars and they went.

William Walton ([22:10](#)):

Seems to me like this whole chain of command ought to be court martialled.

Stephen Bryen ([22:14](#)):

Well, that's on CENTCOM. CENTCOM planned this operation.

William Walton ([22:18](#)):

CENTCOM is?

Stephen Bryen ([22:19](#)):

Central Command. Which has responsibility for the Middle East. By the way, they just jammed Israel into CENTCOM. They used to be in European Command EUCOM. And I think the Israelis have to rethink that pretty quickly because it's not a place they want to be these days. CENTCOM made a mess. Now, you can say, okay, the Pentagon was weak. They didn't plan and the whole thing was screwed up. But the fact is that was on CENTCOM. They had the responsibility. What does the head of CENTCOM say, "Taliban really helped us." That's what he said. They were great. They helped us assure security. They'll get people to the airport. Oh, I remember people getting shot and killed and hanged and mutilated and every other damn thing trying to get to the airport so what's he talking about?

William Walton ([23:11](#)):

Kyle, you do domestic terrorism. Now I know Mark Milley is it General Mark Milley? He's worried about white rage.

Kyle Shideler ([23:22](#)):

Yes he is.

Stephen Bryen ([23:23](#)):

We may find he gets it now.

William Walton ([23:24](#)):

Well, yeah. There's some white rage right here directed at him. But what about real terrorists? What about people? How many of these 125,000 do we think will be security problems inside the United States?

Kyle Shideler ([23:41](#)):

Well, we know something like somewhere between a 100 and 350 already pinged on the biometric screenings that we do for actual terror ties. I think that number is probably going to be low. We know that the French are already surveilling Afghan evacuees because they were identified as having Taliban ties. The United Kingdom had an individual arrive in Birmingham, England who was on the no fly list. Apparently you can be on the no fly list and still get on a military air flight out of Kabul was the lesson there. The answer is, we have no idea. And they're going to tell you that they're vetting these people. They're going to tell you that they have information about who these people are and they don't.

Stephen Bryen ([24:26](#)):

And we have an open border. People are crossing our border every day. Some of them are Afghans.

Kyle Shideler ([24:36](#)):

Yeah. They just moved the Southern border to Kabul airport, essentially, as far as I can tell.

Stephen Bryen ([24:40](#)):

Yeah. And it's open. It's very reckless. And I think our goal in Afghanistan from the beginning was supposed to be to deal with terrorists, al-Qaeda was the target, the original target. By the way, the al-Qaeda guys are returning, the ones that left Afghanistan are now coming back.

William Walton ([25:06](#)):

Break it down. Taliban, ISIS, al-Qaeda, for those of us that don't follow this. They're really making common cause aren't they?

Kyle Shideler ([25:14](#)):

They have a common cause, they are all jihadists. They are all waging jihad to impose Islamic law.

William Walton ([25:21](#)):

These distinctions that some people try to make, oh well, there's the Taliban. That's just a blurring over.

Kyle Shideler ([25:28](#)):

The notion that the Taliban has more in common with us than it has with ISIS is a type of insanity you can only find inside the beltway. It's nuts.

William Walton ([25:38](#)):

Another insanity inside the beltway, how many troops do we have there? 3,500?

Stephen Bryen ([25:43](#)):

At the end?

William Walton ([25:44](#)):

Yeah.

Stephen Bryen ([25:45](#)):

Before we pulled, 2,500 I think was the number.

Kyle Shideler ([25:47](#)):

Yeah, until they plussed it up.

William Walton ([25:48](#)):

What are we doing with 25,000 Humvees there? We left set \$90 billion worth of military equipment and you look at the numbers of pieces of equipment we had for 2,500 soldiers. Were they going to set up an army surplus shop in Bagram Airbase?

Stephen Bryen ([26:10](#)):

There was an article this morning that said that the Taliban now have enough arms, it's the size of it's military, including all the equipment that we left that it's larger now than seven or eight European states and Ukraine.

William Walton ([26:28](#)):

Okay, well but if they were servicing a number of soldiers who would actually use the equipment, we'd spent billions and billions of dollars.

Stephen Bryen ([26:36](#)):

We didn't take it out. We were cutting up equipment.

Kyle Shideler ([26:38](#)):

And we never do. Most people don't realize that but we almost never take equipment out of places. We'll blow it up in place. We'll disable it. We'll sell it to the local government but we don't take things home because it's too expensive.

Stephen Bryen ([26:52](#)):

And a lot of the stuff pristine, I've seen the photos. It's just lined up, you see all these Humvees with guns on top and all that just lined up brand new.

Kyle Shideler ([27:02](#)):

And then the other thing is people don't remember, we needed a deal with the Russians to get equipment into Afghanistan when the war started to move it through the central Asian countries. Well, that all got cut off so we could not use the railways and ships and stuff that we use to bring equipment in. The only option we had was air.

William Walton ([27:21](#)):

Who cut it off.

Kyle Shideler ([27:22](#)):

That was part of the falling apart of relations between the US and Russia in the past 20 years.

William Walton ([27:27](#)):

Okay. In terms of managing men and material, the Defense Department has done a lousy job on both.

Kyle Shideler ([27:35](#)):

Fair statement.

Stephen Bryen ([27:36](#)):

They clearly didn't care about it.

William Walton ([27:37](#)):

Didn't care.

Stephen Bryen ([27:38](#)):

Yeah. It's just money.

William Walton ([27:40](#)):

And you're watching the Bill Walton Show. I'm here with Kyle Shideler and Stephen Bryen and we're talking about the massive incompetence and corruption that it seems to exist inside the Pentagon and the defense establishment and why yours truly is getting a very sinking feeling about where this is going for the United States. Bagram Airbase, who now is going to end up with control of Bagram Airbase?

Stephen Bryen ([28:10](#)):

Well, the Taliban has it.

William Walton ([28:12](#)):

Initially. Don't you think the Chinese have got their eyes set on that? Don't you think, if you look at all those state actors around there, don't you believe that?

Stephen Bryen ([28:22](#)):

It's possible. I wouldn't rule it out, but I think that the Taliban they're very ambitious now, as they should be. They have an air force. We left them one.

William Walton ([28:32](#)):

Can they fly it?

Stephen Bryen ([28:33](#)):

Well, they flew some helicopters yesterday, including a guy hanging from one.

Kyle Shideler ([28:38](#)):

Yeah. Whether they are flying a helicopter or they're just pointing a pistol at the head of the guy who's flying the helicopter, it doesn't really matter.

William Walton ([28:42](#)):

It sounds like that's the case.

Stephen Bryen ([28:44](#)):

I read this morning that they're now recruiting some Afghan pilots that were trained by us to fly these aircraft. Basically they have the COIN aircraft, which are Brazilian aircraft that were expensively made in the United States but they're Brazilian origin. Which is a propeller driven aircraft. And they have lots of helicopters. That's their air force. And one C-130 I saw. I don't know why that was left.

William Walton ([29:14](#)):

How does this play out with China and with the other state actors around? They're not going to just let that sit there.

Stephen Bryen ([29:21](#)):

Well, the Chinese of course are interested in two things. One is a deal that will keep the Taliban from supporting the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province. Was the Uyghurs are Muslims that the Chinese don't like and the Uyghurs don't like them and that's part of it. And then there's a lot of minerals and wealth in Afghanistan that could be exploited if there's peace.

William Walton ([29:45](#)):

Trillion dollars worth of minerals.

Stephen Bryen ([29:46](#)):

At least. Especially rare earth materials. The Chinese are not foolish. They know how to run a business.

William Walton ([29:55](#)):

Well, my guess is they're going to use their financing as the vehicle to get in. They're financing most of Pakistan now and they're very influential there. You go in, if you're Chinese, you come and say, "Well look, you get Bagram Airbase, you can't really run it. We can help you do that. And we'll refurbish this and do this. And we'll build some new highways and things like that." And pretty soon they've got the whip hand.

Stephen Bryen ([30:20](#)):

Yeah. I'm more interested in what the Russians might do because they have been big black eye in Afghanistan of their own. And whether they will approach Taliban, they haven't recognized the Taliban yet, but I think they're moving in that direction.

William Walton ([30:36](#)):

But they're all leaving their embassies in Kabul.

Stephen Bryen ([30:39](#)):

Their embassy is operating.

William Walton ([30:41](#)):

And China.

Stephen Bryen ([30:42](#)):

Yeah, absolutely.

William Walton ([30:43](#)):

Everybody.

Stephen Bryen ([30:44](#)):

By the way, the administration said, "Well, maybe we'll recognize the Taliban." This close. This close.

Kyle Shideler ([30:54](#)):

They've already floated development aid to the Taliban.

Stephen Bryen ([30:56](#)):

That's right. They're getting in a position, I would think. They won't do it right away because they're afraid of the political reaction at home but two months from now, I'll bet we reopen the US embassy in Kabul.

Kyle Shideler ([31:08](#)):

I'm concerned about the Qataris and the Turks because I know the Turks want Kabul airport really bad. They probably want Bagram too. The Qataris were the first people to land a commercial jet following the US handover of the airport to the Taliban. Qatari relationship with the Taliban is excellent. They were the moderators for all of our discussions with the Taliban over the past 10 plus years. The Turks' relationship with the Taliban is okay, there's some tension there. The Turks I think if they get the airport, that's where you're going to see some interesting interactions between them and China. They are definitely pushing the central Asian country. Erdoğan the president of Turkey has a large sort of Turkic supremacy notion. He wants to exert influence over central Asia. He wants to exert influence over the Uyghurs in China. That could get very interesting very quickly.

Stephen Bryen ([32:11](#)):

Yeah. I'm not sure about it. There's no doubt that Turkey's very ambitious, especially in the Stans, Southern Russia to the Ottoman stamping ground. And even before that a Byzantine stamping ground, it goes back 2,000 years almost. And Erdoğan is very clearly pushing that kind of approach. I don't know if it's going to play in Afghanistan. The Taliban are very difficult as the Turks will find out.

William Walton ([32:43](#)):

You've talked about a strategic retreat that we seem to be making worldwide. United States seems to making worldwide. You guys have both covered this. What's happening?

Stephen Bryen ([32:55](#)):

Well, we are in the middle of a major strategic retreat. Not only in Afghanistan.

William Walton ([33:02](#)):

Yeah, obviously there.

Stephen Bryen ([33:03](#)):

Iraq, Middle East. Let me just put a few little items on the table. We pulled out all our air defenses from the UAE, from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and from Jordan. Especially Jordan's really a surprise to me. Why did we do that? We claimed we needed them for something else, but we don't, we didn't put them anywhere else. We just pulled them out and we didn't ask. We just took. We essentially left them on their own. We have taken our bombers, which we kept in Guam, the B-52s and the B-1s out of Guam and pulled them back to the United States. Why? Why did we? It's not clear exactly why we did that. Of course, our aircraft carrier that was stationed at Yokohama has been used in the Afghanistan, supposedly used. And I don't know what purpose it has, but it's not in Asia right now. Whether it goes back or not, I don't know.

Stephen Bryen ([34:07](#)):

We just did an exercise, it was a good exercise in the Western Pacific with our allies, the British, the Australians, the Japanese and the Indians, which was a very good thing, I think. And that was the one hopeful sign I'll say that I can see. But otherwise the handwriting's not so good and a lot of people in Asia are very nervous, especially about Taiwan but also of course, that means they're very nervous about China. The Japanese especially have said that any attack on Taiwan would be existential for Japan.

William Walton ([34:41](#)):

Taiwan is what, 70 miles from in Japan?

Stephen Bryen ([34:43](#)):

Yeah, little bit more but not much more. From Japan, no, it's further. Depends.

William Walton ([34:50](#)):

I think from the southern island.

Stephen Bryen ([34:51](#)):

If you take a southern island, yeah. But it's close to Okinawa. And of course, it's very close to China.

William Walton ([34:58](#)):

Well, and the Middle East, pulling these weapons out, isn't that a way to make nice with Iran? All these folks seem to think that Iran is like, we've got to reestablish our Iran deal and bring them into the nuclear club. What's going on there?

Stephen Bryen ([35:14](#)):

I think that's the cover story for a different argument. In other words, the nuclear talks, whatever they are, which have been going on for a while now, since Biden came into office, is I think a cover for what we really have in mind, which is a political alignment with Iran. And that means, to diminish the role of

Saudi Arabia and to admit that Iran now has, Iran is going to be in Iraq, essentially running Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, where it has Hezbollah forces, which are proxies for Iran and Iranian advisors.

William Walton ([35:59](#)):

What's the global elites' fascination with Iran?

Stephen Bryen ([36:03](#)):

Well, I think it's a big country. It's a rich country. It's a powerful, increasingly powerful country. At least on paper. Has huge amount of missiles. Probably already, in my opinion, may already have nuclear weapons.

William Walton ([36:16](#)):

Well, that makes it sound legitimate. Does that mean we abandon everybody else?

Stephen Bryen ([36:21](#)):

Well that's the problem.

Kyle Shideler ([36:21](#)):

And I think they also, one of the things they hold against the other regional allies and this was a big part of the Trump administration Middle East plan was because both Trump and Biden wanted to get out of the Middle East to a certain extent, and to get out you have to sort of take a hand in who's going to replace you. And under Trump, we clearly chose the Israelis, the Saudis, the Emirates, are sort of traditional regional allies and we were trying to push them up and get them to cooperate as closely as possible. And the Biden administration and the Obama administration before it, their preference for who replaces the United States in the Middle East has been Iran since 2009, if not earlier. And probably this goes back.

Stephen Bryen ([37:08](#)):

Old story. It's an old story, but Trump I think, held the line properly and was very effective in that regard. And of course the Abraham Accords were really a huge breakthrough in terms of the geostrategic.

William Walton ([37:22](#)):

Abraham Accords were?

Stephen Bryen ([37:23](#)):

The deal between Israel and the UAE and the others to create peace between these, which also means that Israel and those countries can cooperate militarily, which was the really important fact.

Kyle Shideler ([37:41](#)):

And economically too.

Stephen Bryen ([37:41](#)):

And economically and technologically as well. But so you have that. I think that was a piece of genius by Trump and he deserves a Nobel prize for it in my opinion.

Kyle Shideler ([37:54](#)):

If that was worth anything anymore.

William Walton ([37:57](#)):

Well, that's a good point.

Stephen Bryen ([37:58](#)):

Well, it'd be nice to give it to somebody who deserved it as opposed to the alternative.

Kyle Shideler ([38:02](#)):

Once in a while.

William Walton ([38:03](#)):

You're watching the Bill Walton Show. I'm here with two experts from the center for security policy, Kyle Shideler and Stephen Bryen. And we're talking about what's the fascination is with Iran and where we think this might go from here. Is this really signaling though that Biden does not have a foreign policy, Biden only has a domestic policy and what he really wants to do is suck everything out of involvement around the world?

Stephen Bryen ([38:35](#)):

No, he has a foreign policy, so retreat from obligations to our former ally or allies and former allies as much as possible, line up with Iran and then find a way to make a, I think he's looking for a way to make a deal with the Chinese. I think that's coming. I think we'd be fools not to realize that he's going to sell us out in China. I think he is.

Kyle Shideler ([38:57](#)):

I think that's right. But I do think there's something to the notion that the Biden administration is inwardly focused, that they see enemies domestically, not overseas. You had for the first time ever the Biden administration directed our office of the director of national intelligence to do reports on domestic threats, not international threats, which is their role and their purpose. I think there is definitely something about the Biden administration that they see actual enemies abroad as friends and they see fellow countrymen who disagree with them as enemies.

Stephen Bryen ([39:36](#)):

You got a point. But why would we cut the defense budget when China is growing more powerful and challenging us in Asia and elsewhere around the world?

William Walton ([39:48](#)):

Well let's dig into the China piece because China, all the major corporations now just think we are being ridiculous to think China has anything other than honest intentions and we got to keep doing business with them. You talk to the NBA, Nike, Walt Disney, everybody wants to be in China to get hands on that 400 billion person middle class and our social media companies are making common cause with China. Google will work with China but they won't work with their own defense department. Although they might work with this defense department, that may be changing.

Stephen Bryen ([40:27](#)):

Things have changed. Yes.

William Walton ([40:28](#)):

But it seems like there's this realignment where a lot of the elites and all the major corporations and the other power players are also lining up on China's side on a lot of these issues. And you're saying now you think that's going to go, the administration's going to kind of sell us out.

Stephen Bryen ([40:46](#)):

Well, let's see what the Chinese strategy is first. The Chinese strategy is to dominate what they call the first island chain, which means right in the middle of that chain is Taiwan. The question becomes how to get Taiwan. And will the US stay out of it if they get it? And that's the game. And of course they've been threatening Taiwan now with the military overflights, bombers fighter planes, naval exercises, missile exercises. I was in Taiwan in 96 when they had a big missile threat to Taiwan. It was very scary by the way. That's what's going on. And I think the Chinese strategy is to create the kind of situation where the Taiwanese basically surrender. That's what they're after. They don't want a war if they can avoid it but they want to put a lot of pressure on Taiwan and on the United States. And they're doing it quite effectively, I think.

Stephen Bryen ([41:46](#)):

From a capitalistic point of view to use your terminology, our major companies for the most part are doing a lot of business in China and they want to continue doing a lot of business in China. They clearly are biased. Industrially, we've given most of our industry over to China anyway, haven't we? If you look at the picture, semiconductors, computers, electronics, automobiles, automobile components, everything has been moved. You can't buy anything today that doesn't say made in China on it. We've allowed that to happen without any attempt, any real attempt. The only real one was a sort of attempt by President Trump to put some of these industries into the United States, if he could. And he tried to do it with the Taiwanese.

Stephen Bryen ([42:43](#)):

Even Taiwan, by the way, has invested a couple of hundred billion dollars in China. Your Apple computers, Apple iPhones are made in China by a company called Foxconn and Foxconn is owned by it. They have a million employees in China and Foxconn is owned by Hon Hai Precision, which is a Taiwanese company. People don't realize that. All of this means that our economy is increasingly and utterly dependent on China today. Very risky.

William Walton ([43:13](#)):

You see the end game is Taiwan being sort of enveloped and sucked into mainland China over time, rather than something else.

Stephen Bryen ([43:22](#)):

Well the old Kuomintang in Taiwan, which was Chiang Kai-shek's party and is the opposition party right now, the DPP, the democratic party in Taiwan is in power. It was very pro China. And they're putting pressure on the public and on the government in Taiwan. And if they win an election, the game is over.

Chinese know that. Chinese know it very well. There's a level of tension and pressure that some people are going to say, it's not worth it.

William Walton ([44:04](#)):

What is it, China's three warfares or four warfares or how many they've got.

Kyle Shideler ([44:08](#)):

Unrestricted warfare.

William Walton ([44:10](#)):

It's cultural, it's political, it's economic. They don't see it as just.

Stephen Bryen ([44:14](#)):

That's right. It's the whole spectrum.

William Walton ([44:16](#)):

And that's, you're saying that this is a much more nuanced way to get at Taiwan.

Stephen Bryen ([44:21](#)):

Well it's not very nuanced, but it's certainly staged.

William Walton ([44:24](#)):

Well compared to just showing up with a cruiser and banging away with cannons.

Stephen Bryen ([44:29](#)):

Look, we've a lot of studies of what happened in the military attack on Taiwan and every one of them concludes that the Taiwanese would lose unless we come in. And even if we come in, it's not a sure thing.

William Walton ([44:43](#)):

The last one I heard about was even if we came in, we don't win.

Stephen Bryen ([44:46](#)):

I said it's not a sure thing. And so, this is discouraging Washington, I think. If you ask the current joint chiefs and the current leadership in the Pentagon, I think they say, "We don't want to get involved in a war there because we're going to lose so we're not going to do it."

William Walton ([45:04](#)):

Well, does the current joint chiefs want to get involved in any war anywhere?

Stephen Bryen ([45:09](#)):

Not likely at the moment.

William Walton ([45:10](#)):

Okay. We've really shut it down.

Stephen Bryen ([45:12](#)):

Course, nobody wants to get involved in a war. I don't want to say something that's not true. The Pentagon is going to be war adverse just as they're risk adverse, of course.

William Walton ([45:23](#)):

Well you need to be. You've got to be calculated about it. You get into something where you can get killed.

Stephen Bryen ([45:27](#)):

And we're dealing with nuclear powers.

William Walton ([45:28](#)):

But on the other hand there are legitimate interests you need to defend.

Kyle Shideler ([45:31](#)):

It is their job to say, "If we get into a war, we will find a way to win it." To say, "Well, we just don't want to do that," it's not really an option. The choice may not be handed to you. And if you don't have a choice except to go to war, how do you win? That's their job. That's where their job starts.

Stephen Bryen ([45:50](#)):

But there's another factor here. If we got involved in a conflict in Asia, we don't have any command and control systems with our allies in Asia, other than Korea. That's to say we have no command and control system with Japan, we have absolutely nothing with Taiwan. We have nothing with Australia, surprisingly. And of course, nothing with India. If we were serious, we would put together the proper command and control system and at least have some capability to resist a Chinese attack. Right now we can't do it by ourselves anymore. It's not possible. And Japan has a fairly interesting air force, has a good Navy. Taiwan has a big air force, not as good as Japan's, but pretty good. But we can't even de-conflict them in a conflict so how can we operate there? These are simple things, not simple operationally, but simple conceptually that we could do to give us a chance to prevail. And right now we're not taking that chance. We're just leaving it drift and drift is very dangerous, extremely dangerous.

William Walton ([47:05](#)):

Well, as predicted, we've run out of time and we've gone past your wife's magic 40 minutes.

Stephen Bryen ([47:12](#)):

I'll hear about it later.

William Walton ([47:13](#)):

Stephen's wife produces webinars and we always seem to get, but we're all just getting very interesting here because I'm trying to figure out if anybody's got any America first in them, in the current administration. And I'm hearing no.

Stephen Bryen ([47:29](#)):

Not really.

William Walton ([47:30](#)):

No. No. The only solution to this is political. I mean only, but in this administration, we're not likely to see course change.

Stephen Bryen ([47:38](#)):

Yes. We need some political change.

William Walton ([47:43](#)):

Kyle, last words.

Kyle Shideler ([47:46](#)):

No, I think that's right. The only America first in them is in their targeting and their counterterrorism interests. They are more focused on Americans than they are on the rest of the dangerous world.

William Walton ([48:00](#)):

Guys, you're at the center for security policy. You've got a terrific website. Your writings are all on there. You've got a blog. What's your blog is the Stephen Bryen?

Stephen Bryen ([48:08](#)):

Bryen's Blog.

William Walton ([48:09](#)):

Bryen's blog. And it's the go to blog for almost everybody in the defense establishment. Lots of very interesting strategic thinking and writing. And Kyle, you've done some amazing stuff. I highly recommend if you are intrigued by what we've been talking about, next step would be the Center for Strategic Policy website. Been talking with Steven Bryen, we got to spell that name differently. And Kyle Shideler.

Stephen Bryen ([48:35](#)):

The other one's ice cream.

William Walton ([48:36](#)):

It is. About Afghanistan and its implications. And this is not over. And we'll have them back to talk some more and hope you enjoyed this. And as always, you can find us, subscribe on YouTube or any of the other major podcast platforms or on our website, thebillwaltonshow.com. Thanks for watching. Thanks for listening.

William Walton ([49:00](#)):

I hope you enjoyed the conversation. Want more? Click the subscribe button or head over to thebillwaltonshow.com to choose from over a 100 episodes. You can also learn more about our guests on our interesting people page and send us your comments. We read every one and your thoughts help

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