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**Press Conference Transcript  
U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis  
And General John W. Nicholson,  
Commander, Resolute Support Mission  
RS Headquarters, Kabul  
Apr 24, 2017**

Secretary Mattis: Good afternoon everybody. Good to see you all. And, I think you're aware of who John Nicholson is, but for those of you who've traveled with me if you've not seen him before, this is the NATO Commander here of the international operation that's been going on for years. And as if we needed a reminder, as I stand here before you, of the type enemy that we're up against, the killing of Afghan citizen soldiers, protectors of the people, just as they were coming out of a mosque, coming out of a house of worship, it certainly characterizes this fight for exactly what it is.

These people have no religious foundation, they are not devout anything, and it shows why we stand with the people of this country against such heinous acts perpetrated by – the word gets used often, I think too often – but this barbaric enemy, and what they do, kind of makes it clear to me why it is we stand together.

I met today with President Ghani. I'd seen him in Europe about two months ago ladies and gentlemen and here we had another focused discussion, here in Kabul, as we work to align our efforts. I thanked him for his warm welcome – and it certainly was that, with him and his leadership – for his personal leadership in the midst of very, very difficult times; and for the inclusive approach of this unity government with Chief Executive Abdullah who was also in both our private meeting, the President and I, also in the larger meeting between our delegations.

We discussed his initiative to make the Government of National Unity more responsive to all of the Afghan people and we all recognize the challenges to this government to that effort, presented by enemies of the Afghan people who refuse to renounce violence.

As you know, President Trump has directed a review of our policy in Afghanistan as the new administration takes hold in Washington. This dictates an ongoing dialogue with Afghanistan's leadership, and that's why I came here. I talked again with President Ghani, with his ministers, and heard directly and at length from the NATO Commander General Nicholson. In order to provide my best assessment and advice as we go forward – advice to the President, to the NATO Secretary General, and all the troop-contributing nations with whom I coordinate and collaborate.

Our NATO Commander General Nicholson is one of our most experienced officers in the field, also one of our most serious strategic thinkers. The teamwork that we enjoy here between the Afghan Government, our diplomats and our international military contingents has reached very, very high levels of partnership – in a word, I found it impressive.

Within the new American administration, of course, our review in Washington is a dialogue with Secretary Tillerson and the President and his staff in the White House. I'd say we're under no illusions about the challenges associated with this mission. 2017 is going to be another tough year for the valiant Afghan Security Forces, and the international troops who have stood, and will continue to stand, shoulder to shoulder with Afghanistan against terrorism, and against those who seek to undermine the legitimate, United Nations recognized government of this nation. If the Taliban wish to join the political process and work honestly for a positive future for the Afghan people, who have suffered long and hard, they need only to renounce violence and reject terrorism. It's a pretty low standard to join the political process.

But those are my impressions, and what I was doing here during these hours that I've been here on the ground, and I can take any questions that you might have. I've got a couple minutes for questions.

Helene, go ahead please.

Helene Cooper, New York Times: Thank you, both of you, for doing this. I'd like to ask both Secretary Mattis and General Nicholson whether it's your assessment that the Haqqani Network was behind the Afghan base attack last week? Also, do you think that the Haqqani Network may have also played a role in the hospital attack last month? And whether you see any contact either way between ISIS and Haqqani here in Afghanistan.

And then separately, for General Nicholson, you've explained that you dropped the MOAB on Achin to clear a cave complex of ISIS fighters, did you also consider the larger strategic message that you might be sending to American adversaries like North Korea, and Syria when you made that decision?

Thank you.

General Nicholson: Thank you Helene, thank you Mr. Secretary. First, let me take the second question first. The Secretary has talked about the strike we conducted in Achin last week, I really have nothing to add with respect to that. I will say we were sending a very clear message to ISIS – not only to ISIS here in Afghanistan but also to ISIS Main: if they come here to Afghanistan they will be destroyed. In keeping with the Secretary's intent, they will be annihilated. So this continuing pressure we're putting on ISIS is achieving that effect and we're going to keep it up.

To shift to the first part of your question: the Haqqanis and the Taliban both pose a threat this year. We have not seen cooperation between ISIS-K and the Haqqanis, however we're always watching for convergence between the various terrorist groups that we see here. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attack on the hospital that occurred; the Taliban have claimed responsibility for the attack up in Mazar-e-Sharif. Again, we don't see the connections between those two groups, but in terms of what they did during these attacks there's very much a connection. As the Secretary talked about in his comments, the level of barbarity and cruelty, shooting patients in their beds, killing young soldiers at the mosque in

prayer; they're reaching new lows, in terms of their behavior. And this is why the majority of the Afghan people, something like 87 percent, reject the Taliban and do not want to see a return of this regime. As the Secretary said, we are open to, I know our Afghan partners are open to, having the Taliban rejoin peaceful life here in Afghanistan. Thank you.

Helene Cooper (follow up): And the first part of my question? Whether... it's your assessment that Haqqani Network was responsible for the base attack on Friday?

General Nicholson: We're still developing that. We'll let you know as we develop more details. The Taliban claimed credit for the attack, but as you know, Helene, the Taliban and Haqqani are linked. So Siraj Haqqani is the deputy of the Taliban, so we tend to look at them as one quite often. So, in the level of sophistication and the way this attack conducted, it's quite possible the Haqqanis were involved.

Kevin Baron, Defense One: Just to follow, you said you're achieving the intended effects on ISIS... can you say for the record that foreign fighters are not coming to Afghanistan, are the numbers dwindling or growing, what's ISIS' ability to sustain it. In short, is it the threat that many folks back home are starting to think it is?

General Nicholson: Well, ISIS is certainly a threat, globally. ISIS Khorasan Province is one of the principal affiliates of ISIS, and so they're attempting to establish their own form of a caliphate here by seizing and holding terrain. As you're aware... we've been attacking that caliphate... since early last year – reduced it by about two thirds in size, reduced their fighters by at least half. We've done this through a series of operations – the latest one started in early March – continuous pressure on them and we're going to keep going until they're defeated in 2017. Now, they have an aspiration, I think, to move fighters here from Syria – we haven't seen it happen. And, in fact, by reducing their sanctuary here, by annihilating them here, it should be very clear to ISIS Main, there is no space for them to come to in Afghanistan.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Washington Post: Thank you, gentlemen, for doing this. If you two could just address the influx of Russian weapons into Afghanistan and turning up in Taliban hands in Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan, and what both of you – I guess General Nicholson on the tactical and strategic level, and Secretary Mattis, on the diplomatic level, the political level – what you're going to do to stop the Russians from sending these weapons.

Secretary Mattis: You know, the Russians seem to be choosing to be strategic competitors in a number of areas. The level of granularity, and the level of success they're achieving, I think the jury is out on that. I'll let the general talk about any of the specific weapons and all, but the broader strategic framework that you're driving toward, I would say that we will engage with Russia diplomatically, we'll do so where we can. But we're going to have to confront Russia where what they're doing is contrary to international law, or denying the sovereignty of other countries – for example, any weapons being funneled here from a foreign country would be a violation of international law unless they're coming to the government of Afghanistan for the Afghan forces. And so that would have to be dealt with as a violation of international law. (*To General Nicholson*) But if you have any information on the weapons I'm not aware of it.

General Nicholson: The only thing I would add to that is that we continue to get reports of this assistance and of course we had the overt legitimacy lent to the Taliban by the Russians... that really occurred late last year through this process they've been

undertaking. And of course, as the Secretary stated, we support anyone who wants to help us advance the reconciliation process; but arming belligerents, or legitimizing belligerents who perpetuate attacks like we saw two days ago in Mazar-e-Sharif is not the best way forward to a peaceful reconciliation.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff: So to be clear, you're not refuting that they're sending weapons?

General Nicholson: Oh no, I'm not refuting that.

Hans Nichols, NBC News: The gentleman standing next to you said we're at a stalemate in terms of the U.S. vs the Taliban; he's also requested thousands of more troops. Which one is it? Are you comfortable with the stalemate, or do we need more troops?

Secretary Mattis: Frankly, I don't see any tension between those two things, those two factors. Right now we're engaged in defining the challenge, the way ahead, with a whole lot of nations and it depends; there's no one nation that's going to carry all this, so there's a lot of collaboration, and that is based on an assessment of the tactical and operational challenge, and where we want to be in what time. So to... I'm not going to get into how you would characterize it in one word, but we are going to address that situation and move forward together against the terrorists. And that is exactly why we're meeting now, and those obviously I owe some confidentiality on where my thinking's at and what I'm going to recommend once I compile my notes from this trip and speak to some of our NATO allies about the way ahead.

Hans Nichols: Let me ask this, sort of in a different way: Is NATO leaning... (Inaudible)

Secretary Mattis: The bottom line is, that this fight against terrorism is going to go on. You saw what happened in Paris, you see the French troops engaged down in Africa; you find the NATO-led force, a lot more than just NATO, here in Afghanistan; you see what's going on against ISIS in Syria. This fight is going to go on. We're in an era of frequent skirmishing – it's going to be far-flung, and that's the nature of this fight. Concise, short definitions in one local area or another, do not give sufficient credit to really defining the complexity of the issue.

*\*\*End of news conference\*\**

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