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Hearing on Afghanistan: What is an Acceptable End-State, and How Do We Get There?

Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for asking me to appear before this Committee, in this instance to discuss U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and, more specifically, what constitutes an acceptable end-state in that country and how the United States can best work to bring it about. As has been the case over the past eight years, my statement and testimony today reflect my personal views and not those of the Council on Foreign Relations, which takes no institutional positions on matters of policy.

The questions that inform this hearing are at one and the same time critical yet difficult to answer. Indeed, I have come to think that just about anything associated with Afghanistan is difficult. I first visited that country as a researcher in the late 1970s in the months preceding the Soviet-engineered coup. Just over a decade later, Afghanistan was part of my portfolio of responsibility when I served as the senior director for Near East and South Asian Affairs on the National Security Council staff of President George H.W. Bush. It was in the first weeks of that administration – in February, 1989, to be precise – that the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan came to an end. And, more recently, in the aftermath of 9/11, I served as U.S. coordinator for the future of Afghanistan under President George W. Bush.

Much of the debate about Afghanistan has focused on whether U.S. policy is likely to succeed, with “success” loosely defined as bringing about an Afghan government that in several years’ time can hold off the Taliban with only a modest amount of continuing American help. In theory, several more years of intense U.S. military effort will provide the time and space required to train up the Afghan army and police and weaken the Taliban so that they no longer constitute an overwhelming threat or, better yet, decide to negotiate an end to the conflict.

I am deeply skeptical that this policy will work given the nature of Afghanistan (above all, the weakness of central institutions) and the reality that Pakistan will continue to provide a sanctuary for the Taliban. Yes, U.S. forces will

succeed at clearing and holding, but successful building by the end of 2014 is a long shot at best. Some Taliban may give up but many and probably most will not. Afghan military and police forces will increase in number and improve in performance but not nearly as much as is needed.

Of course, I may well be proven wrong here, and sincerely hope I will be if the decision is made to keep U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan relatively high until the end of 2014 or even longer, as is possible if the United States bases any withdrawal decision on conditions that will be difficult to bring about. But the bigger question hovering over current U.S. Afghan policy is whether it is worth it even if it were to succeed. I would argue it is not, both on the micro (local) level and the macro (global) level.

Some perspective is required. American troops have been fighting in one form or another in Afghanistan for nearly a decade. But it is essential to note that today's Afghan war is fundamentally different than the one waged after the 9/11 attacks. That war was a war of necessity: the most important national interest (self-defense) was involved, and there were no promising, timely alternatives to the use of military force once it became clear diplomacy would not bring about an end to Afghan government, i.e., Taliban, support for global terrorism.

Over time, however, Afghanistan evolved into a war of choice. What made it so were two developments. First, U.S. interests had become less than vital with the near-elimination of al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Afghanistan no longer represented a significant global terrorist threat, and certainly no more of one than several other countries (most notably, Pakistan) in the region and in Africa. Second, there were other viable policy options available to the United States in Afghanistan, in particular a more narrow and limited counter-terrorism strategy coupled with a degree of nation, i.e., capacity, building. The situation did not warrant our becoming a protagonist in Afghanistan's civil war, the adoption of a counter-insurgency strategy, or the tripling of U.S. force levels to near 100,000.

Just to be clear, wars of choice are not wrong per se. But before undertaking one, it is essential to demonstrate that the likely benefits of using military force will outweigh the costs and produce better results at less cost than other policies. Afghanistan does not meet these tests. It is not a major terrorist haven, and it should not be assumed it will again become one even if the Taliban make inroads. It was and is an error to equate Taliban return with al-Qaida's return. If there is some renewed terrorist presence and activity in Afghanistan, we can and should respond to it much as we have been doing in other countries such as Yemen and Somalia.

The Afghan-Pakistan tie is at the heart of U.S. policy and its limits. There is no way the United States will be able to persuade Pakistan to become a full partner in Afghanistan (and stop providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban) given Islamabad's obsession with India and its view of Afghanistan as a critical source of strategic depth in its struggle with India. Even a solution to the Kashmir conflict would not change this – and there is no solution to Kashmir in the offing, certainly not in a time frame that would prove relevant to U.S. decision-making for Afghanistan.

At the macro or global level, Afghanistan is simply absorbing more economic, military, human, diplomatic, and political resources of every sort than it warrants. The \$110-\$120 billion annual price tag – one out of every six to seven dollars this country spends on defense – is unjustifiable given the budget crisis we face and the need for military (especially air and naval) modernization. The history of the 21st century is far more likely to be determined in the land areas and waters of Asia and the Pacific than it is on the plains and in the mountains of Afghanistan. We had also better be prepared for a number of future counterterrorist interventions (along the lines of Somalia, Pakistan, and Yemen) in Libya and elsewhere in the Greater Middle East and Africa. We also need to make sure we have adequate forces for possible contingencies on the Korean Peninsula and conceivably with Iran. Afghanistan is a strategic distraction, pure and simple. Secretary of Defense Gates's recent West Point speech makes a case for avoiding sending a large American land force into places like Afghanistan. I agree. But less clear is why we should continue to deploy a large number of soldiers there for the present and near future.

All this is an argument for doing considerably less than what we are doing, by transitioning rapidly (by mid- or late 2012) to a relatively small, sustainable, strategically-warranted deployment, one I would estimate to be on a scale of 10,000-25,000 troops. The precise number of U.S. troops would be determined by the terrorist threat, training goals, the role assigned to civilians and contractors, and what the Afghans were willing to accept. The future U.S. troop presence should allow for continued counter-terrorist operations (along the lines of what was just carried out by Special Forces in Pakistan) and for training of Afghan forces at both the national and local level.

Such a strategy would be consistent with existing policy, i.e., the president all along has said the United States would begin troop reductions as of mid-2011. At issue is the pace or glide slope of U.S. troop reductions. The president did not commit to any particular pace or end point.

Reductions of the scale being advocated here and the phasing out of combat operations against the Taliban have a number of advantages. It would save upwards of \$75 billion a year and sharply reduce American casualties. Doing so takes into account Afghan nationalism and the understandable popular desire to limit foreign forces in number and role. Doing less with less avoids a large footprint that would be costly and risks wearing out our welcome. A more modest strategy is a more sustainable strategy in every way.

Continuing to do what we are doing on the scale we are doing it will not necessarily achieve more than what is being suggested here given Afghanistan's history, leadership, demography, culture, geography, and neighborhood, in particular Pakistan. And even if substantial progress is achieved in the near-term, there is nothing to suggest those gains will endure. Strategy is about balancing means and ends, resources and interests, and the time has come to restore strategic perspective to what the United States is doing in Afghanistan.

At the same time, to say that current policy in Afghanistan is not warranted by either the stakes or the prospects is not to say the United States has no interests or can achieve nothing. There is a need for continued counter-terror and counter-drug operations. There is also a case for continued training of government and local forces. The United States has an interest in seeing human rights respected in Afghanistan. A continued U.S. military presence would provide a backdrop for efforts to persuade individual Taliban troops and commanders to give up the fight and negotiate a modus vivendi with the Afghan government. The intention of keeping some troops after 2012 takes away the argument that we are leaving Afghanistan, something that should reassure many Afghans in and out of government, those Pakistanis who want to know the U.S. commitment is continuing beyond 2014, and those in this country who do not want to do anything that could be interpreted as losing and thereby handing a victory to extremists.

An additional argument against withdrawing is that great powers need to be careful about making dramatic policy changes. Revising a policy is one thing; reversing it quite another. A reputation for reliability is important. This line of thinking, however, should not be employed to justify a continued commitment of large numbers of lives, dollars, and time on behalf of questionable goals.

Consistent with the desirability of maintaining a military presence in Afghanistan, I support talks taking place between the U.S. and Afghan governments on a long-term security relationship, one that would include U.S. forces remaining in the country for some time to come. There is obviously a significant degree of internal Afghan and regional resistance to this notion. To help allay some of these concerns, there should be no U.S. permanent bases and no permanent U.S. troop presence. The arrangement could be for an initial period of five to ten years and could be cancelled by either side with one year's notice.

I understand that this hearing is about Afghanistan, but for any number of reasons it is impossible to discuss it without also discussing Pakistan. Pakistan is widely acknowledged to be more important than Afghanistan given its population, its arsenal of nuclear weapons, the presence of large numbers of terrorists on its territory, and the reality that developments in Pakistan can have a profound impact on the trajectory of India, sure to be one of the most important countries in the world.

More specifically, there is the widespread view that the United States has to do a great deal to stabilize Afghanistan lest it become a staging ground for groups that would undermine Pakistan. But it is Pakistan that is providing the sanctuary and support to the Afghan Taliban who are the greatest threat to Afghanistan's stability. The Pakistanis are doing so because they want to retain influence in their neighbor and to limit Indian inroads.

Why the United States should be more concerned than Pakistanis that Afghanistan could one day endanger Pakistan is not clear. More important, this view exaggerates Afghanistan's actual and potential influence over developments in Pakistan. To be sure, Pakistan is a weak state. But this weakness results more than anything from internal divisions and poor governance. If Pakistan ever fails, it will be less because of insurgents coming across its borders than from decay within them.

It is hard to imagine a more complicated bilateral relationship than the one between Washington and Islamabad. Pakistan is at most a limited partner; it is not an ally, and at times it is not even a partner. There are many reasons for the mutual mistrust; what matters for our purposes here is that it is pervasive and deep. The United States should be generous in providing military and economic assistance only so long as it is made conditional on how it is used; U.S. markets should be more open to Pakistani exports. But we must accept that there will always be clear differences to how we see the world and sharp differences over what is to be done. Under these circumstances, U.S. foreign policy should follow a simple guide: we should cooperate with Pakistan where and when we can, but we should act independently where and when we must. The recent successful operation that killed Osama Bin Laden is a case in point.

Interest is growing in the possibility of diplomacy to contribute to U.S. policy. Three potential paths are receiving considerable attention. One involves the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. There is talk of moving toward some sort of a new "shura" that would attempt to integrate the Taliban into the formal ruling structure of Afghanistan. The second involves India and Pakistan. The third involves neighboring and regional states, including Pakistan as well as Iran, India, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and others. This would resemble the "6 plus 2" forum that facilitated Afghan-related diplomacy in the past.

I judge prospects for a major breakthrough on either the Afghan/Taliban or India/Pakistan fronts to be poor. There is a weak and divided Afghan government that enjoys at best uneven support around the country. The Taliban are themselves divided. Pakistan has its own agenda. It is far from clear that the situation is ripe for a power-sharing accord that would meaningfully reduce much less end the fighting. India and Pakistan are far apart and again it is not clear the leadership in either government is in a position to undertake significant negotiations involving meaningful compromise. None of this is reason not to explore these possibilities, but expectations should be kept firmly in check. Prospects might be somewhat better for reviving a regional forum, though, and this possibility should be pursued.

I should add that I endorse talks between the United States and those Taliban leaders willing to engage. Direct communication is much preferable to either the Pakistan or Afghan governments acting as an intermediary. Consistent with this perspective, the decision announced by Secretary of State Clinton in February to drop preconditions for talking to the Taliban was a step in the right direction. The same logic holds for our rejecting any Taliban preconditions. What matters in a dialogue is less where it begins than where it ends. The Taliban should understand we will attack them if they associate with terrorists and we will only favor their participation in the

political process if they forego violence. The Taliban should also know that we will continue to provide military training and support to the Afghan central government and to local groups of our choosing.

We should not kid ourselves, though: there is unlikely to be a rosy future for Afghanistan any time soon. The most likely future for the next few years and possibly beyond is some form of a messy stalemate, an Afghanistan characterized by a mix of a weak central government, strong local officials, and a Taliban presence (supported out of Pakistan) that is extensive in much of the Pashtun-dominated south and east of the country. Resolution of the ongoing conflict by either military or diplomatic means is highly unlikely and not a realistic basis for U.S. policy. Walking away from Afghanistan, however, is not the answer. Instead, this country should sharply scale back what it is doing and what it seeks to accomplish, and aim for an Afghanistan that is “good enough” in light of local realities, limited interests, and the broad range of both domestic and global challenges facing the United States.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before this committee. I look forward to your questions.