

September 16, 2009
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Mr. Chairman, Senator Lugar, and Members of the Committee: I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. Achieving an outcome in Afghanistan advantageous to our national security interests demands a careful appraisal of what America is trying to accomplish and an appreciation for the resources required to get there.¹

The Ends: No Sanctuary for Terrorists and No Regional Meltdown²

Coalition forces invaded Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 with the objective of toppling the Taliban government and defeating Al Qaeda. The Bonn Agreement and subsequent accords expanded Afghan and coalition aims far beyond these original objectives. After seven years of strategic drift, coalition efforts have failed to persuade many Afghans that it is wise or safe to defy the Taliban.³ Just as ominously, the prolonged nature of the conflict, mounting casualties and financial costs, and the lack of demonstrable progress have combined to weaken popular support for the mission in many NATO nations, even in the United States. But the fact that progress has been hampered by confused strategy and insufficient resources is an indictment of the conduct of this war, not its objectives. It does not mean that the campaign in Afghanistan is fruitless or that America’s interests in this part of the world are unimportant.

The primary objective of American efforts in Pakistan and Afghanistan remains the elimination of the Al Qaeda-associated sanctuaries and, if possible, top leaders that support transnational terrorist operations. Originally based in Afghanistan but squeezed by allied military operations, many in this shadowy alliance have shifted to Pakistan’s cities and frontier areas, beyond easy reach of the coalition. American efforts now focus on Pakistan as a launching pad for transnational terrorists and insurgents fighting in Afghanistan. But the problem runs both ways: a failed Afghanistan would become a

¹ This testimony draws upon John A. Nagl, “A Better War in Afghanistan”, to be published in *Joint Force Quarterly* in November 2009. The author thanks Brian M. Burton of the Center for a New American Security for his assistance in the preparation of this testimony.

² This section draws upon Nathaniel C. Fick, David Kilcullen, John A. Nagl, and Vikram J. Singh, “Tell Me Why We’re There? Enduring Interests in Afghanistan (and Pakistan),” Center for a New American Security Policy Brief, 22 January 2009; and John A. Nagl, “Surge In Afghanistan Can Work, With Right Resources, Enough Time” *US News and World Report*, 23 February 2009.

³ Ann Scott Tyson, “In Helmand, Caught Between U.S., Taliban; ‘Skittish’ Afghans Wary of Both Sides”, *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2009.



base from which Taliban and Al Qaeda militants could work to further destabilize the surrounding region. Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban have served as an inspiration and sometime-ally of violent extremist groups targeting resource-rich states of Central Asia.⁴ More dangerously, they also have ties to the insurgents seeking to overthrow Pakistan, and the ultimate prize in that contest would be not another ridge or valley, but possibly access to the Pakistani nuclear arsenal. An unraveling, whether gradual or unexpectedly rapid, of Pakistan in the face of the Taliban insurgency could spark a cascading regional meltdown and lead to nuclear arms falling into the hands of a terrorist group that would use them against the United States or its allies. This is, to be sure, widely considered a low-probability event, but the security of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons is hardly clear and U.S. visibility into events there is fairly low.⁵

Because these threats of terrorist sanctuary and regional instability emanate from territory shared by Pakistan and Afghanistan, Pakistan must be encouraged to confront terrorism within its borders and curtail its military’s clandestine support for extremist factions. Stepping back America’s commitment to the theater would be a particularly odd choice at the present time, given the recent improvement in Pakistani efforts to conduct counterinsurgency against its own radical elements and in American-Pakistani intelligence sharing. The course of 2009 has seen dramatic changes in the Pakistani willingness to wage war against insurgents who increasingly threaten the survival of the government. In that sense, the alarming advances of Taliban-aligned forces in Pakistan during the early months of 2009 proved to be something of a blessing in disguise: the militants’ attacks into heartland provinces like Swat and Buner galvanized a previously indifferent Pakistani public and military to stand up to the militants and drive them back.⁶ This is momentum toward that the United States should seek to encourage while working to overcome decades of Pakistani mistrust of an America that has not been perceived as a reliable or supportive partner.

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, the United States curtailed virtually all of its assistance to Pakistan and was perceived by a generation of Pakistani leaders as having abandoned the region. In sharp contrast to the close security relationship that prevailed for the preceding decade, Washington quickly moved to distance itself from engagement and support of Pakistan, culminating

⁴ See Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) and Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁵ See David Sanger, “Obama’s Worst Pakistan Nightmare,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 11, 2009.

⁶ See Haider Ali Hussein Mullick, “Lions and Jackals: Pakistan’s Emerging Counterinsurgency Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* (online only), July 15, 2009, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65191/haider-ali-hussein-mullick/lions-and-jackals>.

in decisions to impose sanctions and ban military-to-military exchanges with Pakistan over its nuclear weapons programs and tests. Pakistani leaders, military officers, and policy elites have not forgotten these events, and our actions ensured that U.S. policymakers lost one of our most significant sources of understanding and levers of influence over events in the region for a generation.⁷ The improving but still fragile relationship of cooperation on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency would be damaged by an American pullback now: the Pakistani leadership would be further convinced that the United States cannot be relied upon and encouraged to maintain its ties to Islamist militant groups as a strategic hedge, both dangerous developments from a U.S. national security standpoint.

Preventing the return of the Taliban to control of Afghanistan, maintaining stability in Pakistan, and keeping up the pressure against al-Qaeda are objectives worthy of American effort. U.S. policymakers must, of course, weigh all strategic actions against America’s global interests and possible opportunity costs. But in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the low-cost strategies do not have an encouraging track record of success since the initial success of Operation Enduring Freedom. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, the United States sought to limit its own involvement by working by, with, and through militia or tribal commanders to provide security and mop up the remaining al-Qaeda presence. But in many cases this approach empowered these commanders to act abusively and unaccountably, which alienated an Afghan population that had been promised a new “Marshall Plan” by the United States and thereby facilitated the Taliban’s reemergence as an insurgency against the new government and international presence.⁸ Drone attacks, which have been highly touted for their ability to eliminate Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders,⁹ have certainly killed numerous terrorists and insurgents. But they have not prevented militant forces from making threatening advances in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is not to say that drone strikes or alliances of convenience with tribal and militia commanders should not have a role in the U.S. campaign, but neither should form the primary basis for our strategy going forward. The “light footprint” option has failed to secure U.S. objectives; as the Obama administration and the U.S. military leadership have recognized, it is well past time for a different approach.

Toward a “Better War” in Afghanistan

⁷ See, for example, Hussain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 282-99.

⁸ See Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 15-21.

⁹ See Greg Miller, “U.S. Missile Strikes Said to Take Heavy Toll on Al Qaeda,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 2009.

Preventing Afghanistan from again serving as a sanctuary for terrorists with global reach or serving as the catalyst for a broader regional security meltdown are the key objectives of the campaign there. Securing these objectives requires helping the Afghans to build a sustainable system of governance that can adequately ensure security for the Afghan people—the keystone upon which a successful exit strategy depends. In order to achieve this objective, the coalition and its Afghan partners must seek to build a state that reconciles some degree of centralized governance with the traditional tribal and religious power structures that hold sway outside Kabul. An internal balance between centralized and traditional power centers—not central government control everywhere—is a practical basis for assuring the country’s stability, much as it was in the years prior to the Soviet invasion. Achieving these minimal goals will require more military forces, but also a much greater commitment to good governance and to providing for the needs of the Afghan people where they live. The coalition will need to use its considerable leverage to counter Afghan government corruption at every level.

While an expanded international commitment of security and development forces can assist in the achievement of these goals in the short term, ultimately Afghans must ensure stability and security in their own country. The development of a rudimentary state, even a highly flawed one, that is able to provide a modicum of security and governance to its people is necessary to ensure that American security interests will be preserved without a major U.S. ground presence. The successful implementation of a better-resourced effort to build Iraqi security forces, after years of floundering, is now enabling the drawdown of American forces from that country as Iraqi forces increasingly take responsibility for their own security; a similar situation will be the definition of success in Afghanistan, some years from now.

The “clear, hold, and build” counterinsurgency model was relearned over several painful years in Iraq, but at present there are insufficient Afghan soldiers and police to implement that approach by holding areas that have been cleared of insurgents. As a result, American troops have had to clear the same areas repeatedly—paying a price for each operation in both American lives and in Afghan public support, which suffers from Taliban reprisals whenever we “clear and leave.”

These lessons are well-understood, but the question remains whether U.S., NATO, and Afghan forces can execute them. The paucity of Afghan security forces relative to U.S. Marines involved in the summer 2009 offensive in Helmand province was troubling and indicative of a security force assistance effort that has not been taken seriously enough for much of the past eight years.¹⁰ After an area is cleared of

¹⁰ See Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “A Fight for Ordinary Peace,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 2009.

insurgents, it must be held by Afghan troops supported by international advisers and combat multipliers, including artillery and air support. These operations are intended to create the conditions that facilitate Afghan central government reconciliation with traditional local power structures to establish better-secured communities that “freeze out” future Taliban infiltration. Since the additional troops we have deployed in 2009 won’t be enough to secure the whole country, ISAF and Afghan commanders will have to select the most important population centers, such as Kandahar, to secure first. These “oil spots” of security will then spread over time as more Afghan forces come online and gain more competence.

Ultimately, therefore, much of the focus on the direct counterinsurgency role of U.S. forces should shift over time to a clear focus on developing Afghan security forces. More U.S. soldiers are required now to implement a “Clear, Hold, and Build” counterinsurgency strategy, but over time responsibility must transition to the Afghans to secure their own country. If the first requirement for success in a counterinsurgency campaign is the ability to secure the population, the counterinsurgent requires boots on the ground and plenty of them.

The long-term answer is a significantly expanded, and more effective, Afghan security apparatus. The preexisting numerical targets for the development of Afghan security forces are not based on the actual security requirements for the country. The current end strength targets for the Afghan National Army and National Police are 134,000 and 82,000 men, respectively—not nearly enough to provide adequate security in a war-torn country of over 30 million people with very rough terrain. The Obama administration’s interagency policy review team recommended a substantial expansion of the effort to build these forces up to those prescribed end strengths, but that will not be sufficient.¹¹ Some argue that the international community should not develop an Afghan security force larger than what that country’s economy can support. Under peacetime conditions that concern would be important, but basing our security force assistance efforts on the Afghan economy rather than a realistic estimate of the numbers needed to impose a reasonable level of security is not the appropriate course of action now. The United States should initiate a greater international effort to expand the Afghan national security forces. If that means the U.S. government and the international community has to help pay for them, that is what should be done—it will still be far cheaper than maintaining substantial numbers of American and international forces in Afghanistan for an even longer period of time to do the jobs that Afghans should do.

¹¹ The White House, “White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on U.S. Strategy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan,” March 27, 2009, 3.

Building Afghan security forces will be a long-term effort that will require U.S. and international assistance and advisers for many years. Unfortunately, the advisory mission has long been treated as a low priority in practice if not in rhetoric, with advisory teams being assembled in an ad hoc fashion and provided with insufficient training and resources before deploying.¹² The Obama administration has bolstered the effort with the deployment of 4,000 additional troops to serve as advisors.¹³ But it remains unclear whether the U.S. military—and our government as a whole—has truly cracked the code on effectively developing host nation security forces. It is as important to address the qualitative problems with the current security force assistance program as it is to solve the quantitative ones. Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) must be reviewed to ensure that it has the best organization and sufficient capacity to do its job. The advisory effort must have access to the most talented and experienced personnel available—not just those left over after the regular units have picked first. It must be structured in a way that incorporates best practices for security force assistance and is most suited to the specific demands of the Afghan operating environment—not simply assembled in the fashion that is most convenient for America’s existing unit structure. It must focus on developing an Afghan security force that can fulfill the mission of countering the insurgency and providing a sufficient, if imperfect, level of internal security—not on mirror-imaging the force structure of a more advanced Western army dedicated to external defense. And ultimately the entire effort must be judged on the quality of its outputs—professional, competent, reliable Afghan forces—rather than simply how many armed men in uniform come out of its training centers, an approach that clearly produced poor results in the first four years of the Iraq war.

The United States and ISAF also need to get smarter about the way they engage Afghan communities at the local level. Insurgencies can be won or lost at the local level because securing the support of the population requires understanding the specific issues that cause it to sympathize with side or another. Additionally, insurgencies are rarely monolithic: they comprise numerous local factions and individuals fighting for personal gain, revenge against real or perceived slights, tribal loyalties, or other reasons that may have little to do with the insurgency’s professed cause. The Afghan insurgency is no different in this regard.¹⁴ The Taliban is an amalgam of local fighters and mercenary and criminal elements around a hard core of committed jihadists;

¹² See Captain Daniel Helmer, “Twelve Urgent Steps for the Advisor Mission in Afghanistan,” *Military Review*, July/August 2008, 73-81.

¹³ The White House, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan,” transcript, March 27, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/.

¹⁴ See Ganesh Sitaraman, “The Land of 10,000 Wars,” *The New York Times*, 16 August 2009.

according to one detailed study, approximately 40-50 percent of the insurgency is made up of “local allies” fighting for tribal causes or opportunism.¹⁵

Based on such analyses, U.S. commanders are interested in trying to “flip” less ideological factions and promoting the development of local self-defense militias to encourage the Afghan tribes to defend against Taliban infiltration.¹⁶ Exploiting divisions within an insurgency paid dividends in Iraq, where the emergence of Anbar Awakening and Sons of Iraq played a major role in crippling al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and dramatically reducing violence. Again, this is a simple concept that is much harder in practice. Thus far, the insurgency has proven less susceptible to co-optation than its fragmented nature might suggest, partly because U.S. overtures have been limited and partly because the Taliban still holds a level of legitimacy in certain parts of the country. Even in the case of Iraq, the more secular insurgents did not turn against the extremists until they were sufficiently alienated by AQI’s brutal tactics and disregard for local customs.¹⁷ The Taliban’s leadership may not make the same mistakes.

This experience suggests that emphasizing tribal engagement or “flipping” less committed insurgents is not a panacea that will enable the United States to achieve a modicum of security in Afghanistan on the cheap. Local communities are unlikely to turn in favor of ISAF and the Afghan government until these entities demonstrate that they are fully willing and able to drive out the insurgents and provide some level of lasting security and competent (read: less corrupt) governance. They won’t resist the Taliban or help the security forces as long as the insurgency appears to hold the upper hand while the government remains weak at best and abusive at worst. Seizing the initiative from the Taliban and reestablishing the political order’s legitimacy requires securing the population and developing a sophisticated, nuanced understanding of local communities, particularly the conflicts within them that insurgents can exploit to their own ends. Simply targeting militant leaders and foot soldiers and then leaving won’t solve the problem, because local populations know that the insurgents will just go underground to avoid U.S. strikes and then reemerge to take vengeance on those who collaborate with the government once the security forces move on. Security forces that just pass through on sweeps and raids will not gain the local knowledge necessary to understand the particular drivers of the insurgency within the community nor the ability to identify when that community is being infiltrated by outside militants. Attempts to reassert central government authority without a clear grasp of local power structures

¹⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 42-43.

¹⁶ See Fontini Christia and Michael Semple, “Flipping the Taliban,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009.

¹⁷ See John A. McCary, “The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives,” *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2009, 43-59; David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 158-76.

and relationships will only engender more popular resentment against Kabul that plays directly into the hands of the Taliban. In short, until the Afghan government, the United States, and ISAF get their approach to local communities right, those communities will not decisively turn against the insurgency. That means, of course, that while developing anti-Taliban tribal militias and co-opting non-extremist elements of the insurgency will be aspects of the new Afghanistan strategy, they cannot be its primary components.

Cultivating a limited Afghan state apparatus that is legitimate in the eyes of its citizens and works with rather than against local communities is a more important element of the American approach to Afghanistan. Since 2001, presented with an Afghan central government whose presence at the local level has often been either absent, incompetent, or corrupt, the international community has turned increasingly toward nongovernmental organizations for the delivery of services. Yet this approach rarely strengthens the perceived legitimacy of the government in the very communities whose loyalty to the government is being contested. A renewed U.S. commitment to funding grassroots development and governance in Afghanistan must accompany the influx of troops. The Afghan government's National Solidarity Program (NSP) and other programs like it deserve much more American support.¹⁸ The NSP has become one of the government's most successful rural development projects. Under the program, the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) disburses modest grants to village-level elected organizations called Community Development Councils (CDCs), which in turn identify local priorities and implement small-scale development projects. A limited number of domestic and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) then assist the CDCs. Once a CDC agrees on a venture, \$200 per family (with a ceiling of \$60,000 per village) is distributed for project execution. Afghans contribute ten percent of project costs through cash, labor, or other means.

Under this model, the NSP has built schools for thousands of children, constructed village water pumps that save many hours of labor, and assembled irrigation networks that have enabled far higher agricultural yields. More than 12,000 village development councils have been elected, more than 19,000 project plans have been approved, and nearly half of these projects have already been completed. The NSP is the only government program functioning in all 34 provinces, and it has affected nearly two-thirds of Afghanistan's rural population. Moreover, women – whose inclusion is a mandatory component of the program – constitute 35% of the elected CDC representatives.

¹⁸ This discussion of the NSP draws upon John Nagl, Andrew Exum, and Ahmed A. Humayun, "A Pathway to Success in Afghanistan: The National Solidarity Program," Center for a New American Security Policy Brief, 16 March 2009.

The NSP provides one example of how to establish positive links between the Afghan people and the government in Kabul, and there are undoubtedly other models that might offer success stories of their own. The point is that the insurgency and the international security threat it represents will not be defeated simply with armed force, drone strikes, and alliances of convenience with certain factions, although all of those things will play a part. It will ultimately be defeated when the Afghan people see tangible evidence that a non-Taliban political order that really can offer them a modicum of security and governance.

Conclusion: Learning from our Mistakes

The United States played a role in creating the Taliban and Al Qaeda: they grew and thrived amidst the chaos that followed the Soviet withdrawal and subsequent international neglect. Saint Augustine taught that “the purpose of war is to build a better peace,” but America built nothing in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, and the Taliban filled the vacuum that its inaction allowed. Afghanistan became the viper’s nest in which Al Qaeda grew, and the United States paid a price for its inattention and strategic neglect of the region.

After the success of a lightning campaign that overthrew the Taliban and chased Al Qaeda out of Afghanistan, American policy toward the country returned to one of benign neglect. Too few soldiers to secure the population, too little development assistance poorly coordinated, and too little attention to the Pakistan side of the Durand Line allowed the Taliban to regroup, gain strength, and return to threaten the young Afghan government that we created but did not adequately support, particularly in the development of an Afghan Army large enough to secure itself from its (and our) enemies.

The objectives of American policy in Afghanistan are clear, although they have not been articulated as clearly as they should have. Over the next five years, we want to create an Afghanistan from which Al Qaeda has been displaced and from which it continues to suffer disruptive attacks. The government of Afghanistan should be able, with minimal external help, to secure itself from internal threats like the Taliban or the return of Al Qaeda; it should have the support of its people, earned through the provision of a reasonable level of government services (particularly security and an improving economy) and reduced corruption, and be determined to never again provide a safe haven for terror.



The question now is not how to achieve our goals in Afghanistan and Pakistan—we know the answer to that question. The only remaining question is whether America has the will to do what is necessary, or whether we are again determined to abandon this supposedly “unimportant” region of the world in the hope that this time it won’t blow up in our face.



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