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Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee

*Prepared Statement of Lieutenant General David W. Barno, USA (Ret.)
Senior Advisor and Senior Fellow, Center for a New American Security*

In my 2009 Congressional testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee (February 2009), HASC Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs (March 2009), and full House Armed Services Committee (April 2009), I had the opportunity to outline my assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan and offer some prescriptions. This written submission updates that report and looks at the road ahead.

Progress Amidst a Changing U.S. Strategic Context

In early 2009, it became evident the international effort in Afghanistan was “drifting toward failure” and success could be achieved only if dramatic changes were applied – most of all, a dramatic re-assertion of American leadership. Success required “Leadership plus Strategy plus Resources.” In 2009, our efforts were falling deeply short in all three components of this equation.

While much has changed in Afghanistan since 2009, even more has changed in the global strategic context for the United States – within which the Afghan conflict is being fought. The impacts of the U.S. housing, auto and financial meltdowns in late 2008 continue to be keenly felt domestically today. U.S. debt and deficits have reached unprecedented levels, impacting our ability to sustain costly military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in ways not felt even two years ago. In Europe, the Eurozone economic crisis combined with deep declines in nations’ military spending across the NATO alliance offer scant support for any expectation that the U.S. will get more out of our allies, in Afghanistan or in future military endeavors; Libya offers further evidence of NATO shortcomings daily. Osama bin Laden has been killed in a daring U.S. strike into the heart of Pakistan, killing the perpetrator of the 9-11 attacks on the United States, but also calling into deep question the efficacy of our fraught ally in Islamabad. The American people are weary of war, and polls indicate majorities of Americans favor ending the Afghan war rapidly. Around the world, friends and allies worry about a United States in decline, and seek reassurance about the long-term commitment of the U.S. to sustained engagement as a global leader as they view our economic troubles with grave concern. As a nation, the United States is clearly navigating in much different waters today than two years ago – and our policies in Afghanistan must be shaped in light of these indisputable facts.

That said, the United States continues to have vital national security interests at stake in South and Central Asia – interests that transcend Afghanistan itself. The vital importance of protecting these interests must not become obscured by a too-narrow focus on Afghanistan or our impending drawdown

there. *In fact, our drawdown must be shaped with the ultimate protection of long-term vital U.S. interests foremost.*

Protecting three vital U.S. security interests should dominate our thinking as we begin to drawdown forces in Afghanistan: 1) Preventing the region's use as a base for terror groups to attack the United States and our allies 2) Ensuring nuclear weapons do not fall into the hands of terrorists and 3) Preventing a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. Protecting these vital U.S. interests in the coming years must be the penultimate objective of our coming transition in Afghanistan. If the outcome of this transition ultimately puts these vital U.S. interests at grave risk, we will have failed entirely in our mission in Afghanistan – one that has cost the United States over 1,300 lives, hundreds of billions of dollars and over ten years of great sacrifice.

The Situation: Summer 2011

An assessment of our efforts in Afghanistan in July 2011 suggests re-examining the three variables of the success equation posed in early 2009. In each of these variables – leadership, strategy and resources – the United States has dramatically improved its position in the last two-plus years. Generals Stan McChrystal, Dave Petraeus and now John Allen have brought immense talent and counter-insurgency experience to bear in Afghanistan, and their exceptional military leadership has had a markedly positive effect on the war. At the same time, our strategy has shifted from a muddled, NATO-centric “don't fracture the alliance” approach to one focused on counter-insurgency principles, tailored for the unique environment of Afghanistan, and infused with assertive American leadership of the heretofore fractured multi-national effort. Finally, resources have been increased dramatically, enabling this new leadership armed with a new strategy to make substantial gains toward a successful outcome. President Bush began, and President Obama dramatically increased, a major reinforcement of troops shifting the U.S. component from 33,000 to nearly 100,000 troops on the ground today. Our allies have also increased their numbers during this period, although in limited ways that are now declining. Aid and development dollars have grown, and increased numbers of civilians have deployed to work with the U.S. military in the counter-insurgency effort. The combination of these significant changes in leadership, strategy and resources have turned around a mission that was on the road to failure in early 2009 – reversing a period of decline wherein the whole of NATO's effect was far less than the sum of its parts, and one in which the Taliban had escalated their attacks and seized the initiative, putting NATO on its back foot. All this has now changed.

An infusion of nearly 70,000 additional U.S. troops has dramatically reversed the Taliban's momentum and taken away their de facto control of large swathes of southern Afghanistan, notably Kandahar and Helmand provinces, the birthplace of the Taliban. The results of fighting in the East have been more mixed, largely as a result of coalition efforts directing the military “main effort” to the south. Major upticks in “kinetic” operations targeting the Taliban leadership have badly damaged the continuity of the organization, while creating important leverage toward bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table.

While the ultimate effect of this campaign against the diverse groups that comprise the Taliban is not yet certain, there is little question that sustained military pressure remains a crucial component in incentivizing any negotiations.

In the areas where the Taliban has been rolled back, Afghan governance has improved, businesses have returned, and prosperity and personal security has been notably improved. Sustaining these fragile and hard-won gains is likely to prove to be the top challenge of 2012 and beyond – and will ultimately be a central test for growing Afghan security forces and government.

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have also dramatically grown and improved during this period. Under the dynamic leadership of Lt. General Bill Caldwell, commander of NATO Training Mission - Afghanistan, the ANSF now comprise 164,000 Army and 126,000 police, up from 79,000 and 95,000 respectively in early 2009. More importantly, their quality, training and equipment has steadily improved, posturing them to take on the counter-insurgency fight as the U.S. transition begins this summer and continues into next year and beyond.

Yet while the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan today has largely seized the battlefield initiative from the Taliban, serious difficulties remain. Sustaining the success of the last 18 months will be perhaps even more problematic than the campaign that has wrenched the momentum away from the enemy, and now has put him on his back foot. Corruption and lack of Afghan capacity remain crippling problems, and little progress has emerged in these areas. Next door, relations between the U.S. and Pakistan have declined to their lowest point in recent memory, a development that will have immense potential influence on the shape of the next several years in Afghanistan. Similarly, cross-border tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan remain a significant barrier to a comprehensive regional security framework.

As General Allen and Ambassador Ryan Crocker take the reins of the effort, they unquestionably face major challenges. The United States is well served by having these two incredibly skilled and experienced professionals at the helm in Afghanistan during this critical period. America has chosen well in selecting these two dedicated and exceptional leaders – and their talents are about to be tried.

Five Challenges Facing the United States in Afghanistan

Five significant challenges stand out as Crocker and Allen look to sustain and build upon the success of the last eighteen months in Afghanistan:

First, the United States must dispel the widespread uncertainty in the region regarding long term U.S. intentions in Afghanistan. Despite the President's rhetoric in both his December 2009 speech and his most recent June 2011 address, the Administration has been opaque about the substance of a long-term U.S. commitment to Afghanistan and the region. Will U.S. troops stay beyond 2014, how many, and for



what purpose? Vague declarations asserting U.S. resolve, interests or staying power simply lack any credibility in light of the U.S. history in the region. Convincing both regional friends and adversaries of the seriousness of a long-term U.S. commitment requires a strong, public assurance of some level of residual U.S. troops after December 2014, the date of the full transition of security responsibility to the Afghan government – something the Administration has yet to explicitly propose. Our Center for a New American Security (CNAS) reports in December 2010 (authors Barno and Exum) and June 2011 (authors Barno, Exum and Irvine) argue that a long-term residual U.S. force presence of at least 25,000 troops is necessary to defend U.S. interests and establish unequivocally that the United States is not going to once again abandon the region. These troops – mostly special operations forces and “enablers” – would be dedicated to maintaining relentless pressure on al Qaeda and its affiliates, and advising and supporting the Afghan Army as it continues to battle the Taliban. Failing to clearly make such a commitment about long-term U.S. presence encourages all actors in the region to hedge their bets – to base all of their calculations on the question: “What would this decision look like the day after the Americans are gone?” Such uncertainty about U.S. intentions encourages our adversaries, undermines our friends and deeply undercuts our leverage and long term goals in the region.

Second, the U.S. must re-establish working relations with Pakistan. While this mission falls largely outside the direct remit of Ambassador Crocker or General Allen, U.S. strategic goals in the region center far more on the stability of nuclear-armed Pakistan – the second largest Islamic country in the world, one projected to have 300 million people by 2050 – than they do on Afghanistan, a nation of only 30 million. Our new leadership team in Kabul must work closely with U.S. Ambassador Cameron Munter and Lt. General Purl Keen in Islamabad to understand this region through the same lens, and integrate their thinking and efforts to best deliver U.S. long-term regional objectives. Here in Washington, we must avoid the tendency to look at Afghanistan through the soda straw as an “island” in U.S. policy, and start working toward a set of more clearly defined regional goals. Again, our June 2011 CNAS report “Beyond Afghanistan: A Regional Security Strategy for South and Central Asia” lays out our ideas for a coherent regional security strategy for the United States anchored on vital national security interests in the region.

Third, the United States must re-build relations with President Hamid Karzai while at the same time opening the door for the growth of the next generation of Afghan leaders. Karzai’s second five-year term ends in 2014, and U.S. planning must begin now to think through setting conditions for this constitutional transition of power. In the near-term however, the United States must do more to partner with Karzai, re-build the important personal relationships of trust upon which so much credibility and influence in that part of the world rest. The U.S. country team must also begin joint planning on both the transition of military operations and the less apparent drawdown of the dollars connected to supporting large numbers of international forces. The U.S. team in Kabul must work with Karzai and his ministers to buffer the Afghan economy from the shocks coming as international funding streams decline from

current levels by as much as 30-50% in the next three years. With an Afghan economy centrally fueled by these resources, the risks of economic collapse are real – with the ensuing disastrous effects on both U.S. policy objectives and ordinary Afghans.

Fourth, the U.S. must continue to focus on defeating the enemy strategy – both al Qaeda and the Taliban. While al Qaeda has taken some serious blows in the past 18 months, reports of its imminent demise are vastly overstated. We should be wary of underestimating its dangers in the euphoric aftermath of bin Laden’s death. Al Qaeda remains potent, and has proven resilient in its ability to adapt, rebuild and survive over the last ten years. U.S. bases in Afghanistan will be required to successfully prosecute a long-term campaign against al Qaeda – especially given what we have now seen of Pakistan’s inability or unwillingness to take on this deadly adversary, largely headquartered from inside its borders. Regarding the Taliban, defeating their long-term strategy of “run out the clock” can only be done by dispelling the uncertainty regarding sustained U.S. military presence and support in the region. If Afghan security forces are to take over this battle against the Taliban, they must know that they can count on sustained U.S. support – advisers, trainers, air power and logistics. This ultimately saves the United States lives and dollars, and rightfully puts the war in the hands of the Afghans. It effectively shuts out the light at the end of the Taliban’s tunnel – which today is very much left shining by expectations of a full U.S. withdrawal by the end of 2014. We have done astonishingly little to dispel this widespread regional belief in a coming and complete American departure.

Finally, the United States must manage a political, economic and military transition to a future with far fewer U.S. resources matched against a set of aims that remain largely unchanged. During Crocker and Allen’s tenure, U.S. troops will decrease by at least 33,000 out of a 100,000 total, with more withdrawals likely after these first increments depart by summer’s end in 2012. U.S. dollars which directly and indirectly support the Afghan economy will decline commensurately, threatening economic stability. Numbers of deployed U.S. government civilians will also begin to recede. This same period will mark a tumultuous Afghan political evolution as President Karzai looks to the (presumed) end of his term in 2014, and other actors start to emerge. Partnering closely with the Afghan government and military in this setting will be essential to catalyze their efforts to both take charge of their own governance and the war as the U.S. begins to draw down. It will require breaking a decade-long dependence on “Americans in the lead.” This will be an immense leadership challenge at every level from Kabul to district capitals in the most remote provinces – and will in many ways define our efforts over the next 3 1/2 years.

Conclusion

The upcoming period for the U.S. in Afghanistan will be one of transition and change. It also risks being marked by enduring uncertainty about the United States’ ultimate plans in the region. But we must remain alert during this demanding and potentially difficult phase to not lose sight of broader long-term

U.S. strategic objectives. Our transition in Afghanistan must be structured in ways to support and serve the strategic objectives related to U.S. vital national interests, not be seen as an end in and of themselves. Our strategic objectives in the region extend well beyond the borders of Afghanistan. We now must necessarily focus upon finding ways to help maintain regional stability and contain the threat from al Qaeda in light of an impending far smaller (and today, undefined) long-term U.S. presence.

Protecting vital U.S. interests in the coming years requires one or more U.S. bases in the region from which to keep relentless pressure on terror groups who target the United States and our allies. Such a long-term, if modest, U.S. footprint could also serve as a nexus from which to exert positive steadying influence across this volatile region, helping to underwrite stability in an extraordinarily dangerous part of the world. Afghanistan presents the most logical and likely location for such a sustained, limited, military presence.

As we begin the transition of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to this as yet unspecified end state, we must keep these longer-term objectives uppermost in our policy horizon. Ten years of sacrifice by the United States and our allies, thousands of lives lost, and untold billions of dollars invested in this small country in Central Asia demand an accounting – and a failure at the end of this long and costly road to protect enduring U.S. vital interests in the region over the next decade and beyond would be wholly unacceptable to the American people.

Biography

Lt General David W. Barno, USA (Ret.) Senior Advisor and Senior Fellow, Center for a New American Security



General Barno, a highly decorated military officer with over 30 years of service, has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the United States and around the world, to include command at every level. He served many of his early years in special operations forces with Army Ranger battalions, to include combat in both the Grenada and Panama invasions. In 2003, he was selected to establish a new three-star operational headquarters in Afghanistan and take command of the 20,000 U.S. and Coalition Forces in Operation Enduring Freedom. For 19 months in this position, he was responsible for the overall military leadership of this complex political-military mission, devising a highly innovative counterinsurgency strategy in close partnership with the U.S. embassy and coalition allies. His responsibilities included regional

military efforts with neighboring nations and involved close coordination with the Government of Afghanistan, the United Nations, NATO International Security Assistance Force, the U.S. Department of



State and USAID, and the senior military leaders of many surrounding nations and numerous allies.

From 2006-2010, General Barno served as the Director of the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. Concurrently, he was the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans and Families from 2007-2009. He frequently serves as an expert consultant on counterinsurgency and irregular warfare, professional military education and the changing character of conflict, supporting a wide-range of government and other organizations. General Barno is widely published and has testified before Congress numerous times.

A 1976 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, General Barno also earned his master's degree in National Security Studies from Georgetown University. He is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and the U.S. Army War College. General Barno has received numerous awards for his military and public service.