Congressional Research Service

Statement of
Catherine Dale
Specialist in International Security, Congressional Research Service
Before the House Armed Services Committee
On Transition in Afghanistan
February 27, 2013

Not for publication until released by the House Armed Services Committee

Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, Distinguished Members of the House Armed Services Committee,

It is an honor to be invited to testify before this Committee about transition in Afghanistan. It is a particular privilege to appear with my three fellow panelists – Lieutenant General Barno, Dr. Cordesman, and General Keane – all of whom have sharpened my own thinking on these important issues.

I appear here today in my capacity as an analyst with the Congressional Research Service. But I have also had the honor of serving as an advisor to a number of our military commanders in Afghanistan, as part of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and also on extended visits as an outside expert, most recently late last year. I am profoundly grateful for the privilege of having served alongside our first-rate men and women in uniform and our civilian officials. In them, the nation has much to be proud of.

Today's discussion is timely. President Obama's announcement, as part of his State of the Union address two weeks ago, that U.S. forces in Afghanistan would draw down by 34,000 troops over the next year, established some clear parameters for further U.S. engagement in Afghanistan but also left room for further policy refinements as well as choices to make in execution.[1] His announcement took place against the backdrop of a formal Transition process – the staged shift of security responsibility from international to Afghan forces – which is set to enter its final phase this spring. This is also a time of political transition for Afghans, with the prospect of presidential elections in 2014, and a time of transition writ large for every facet of international engagement and support. A time of transition offers the opportunity to revisit – and affirm or refine – current strategy.

[1] See President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President in the State of the Union (SOTU) Address, Washington, DC, February 12, 2013.

For the U.S. Government, fundamental components of strategy for Afghanistan include:

- U.S. national security interests in Afghanistan and the region;
- the *minimum essential conditions* – political, economic, security – that would need to pertain in Afghanistan and the region in order to protect U.S. interests over the long run;
- current and projected U.S. approaches, until and after 2014, for helping Afghans establish those conditions;
- the timeline by which, and extent to which, Afghans are likely to be able to sustain those conditions with relatively limited support from the international community;
- risks to U.S. national security interests if Afghans are unable to do so; and
- the importance of this overall effort – given its likely timeline, risks, and costs – compared to other U.S. priorities.

Background

The Obama Administration has consistently articulated two core goals for the war – to defeat al-Qaeda and to prevent future safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[2] Yet there is little agreement in the broader policy community about what it would take to accomplish those goals. What has been missing from the debates, many suggest, is a clear and publicly available articulation of the minimum essential conditions – the specific ends – that must be achieved in Afghanistan and the region in order to ensure the protection of U.S. interests over the long-term.

The basic framework for current U.S. Government civilian and military efforts in Afghanistan dates back to 2009, when General Stanley McChrystal took command of ISAF and was tasked to conduct an initial strategic assessment. That assessment, and the subsequent ISAF campaign design it informed, were based on the Administration's two core goals as well as on the novel prospect of more troops, more civilian expertise, more resources, more high-level leadership attention, and relatively unlimited time.[3]

Since then, six major constraints have been introduced:

- In December 2009, in a speech at West Point, President Obama announced that a troop surge would take place, but that those surge troops would begin to draw down in July 2011.
- In November 2010, at the NATO Lisbon Summit, the Afghan Government and the NATO Allies, including the United States, agreed to pursue a formal process, Transition, in which responsibility for security would shift over time to the Afghan Government. This process was to begin soon – in early 2011 – and to be completed by the end of 2014.
- In a June 2011 speech, President Obama announced parameters for drawing down the surge forces. From the surge peak of about 100,000 U.S. troops, the U.S. troop commitment in Afghanistan would decrease by 10,000 troops by the end of 2011, and by a further 23,000 by

[2] See for example President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Washington, DC, March 27, 2009; and President Barack Obama, Remarks by President Obama in Address to the Nation from Afghanistan, May 1, 2012. However, two weeks ago during his SOTU, President Obama referred to the U.S. goal as "defeating the core of al Qaeda", a new and narrower formulation, see SOTU, 2013.
[3] General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF's Initial Assessment, August 30, 2009. I, along with fellow panelist Dr. Cordesman and others, was part of that assessment team.

the end of September 2012, reaching a total of 68,000 by that date. Afterwards, the pace of further drawdowns would be "steady" and at some point the mission would change "from combat to support."

- In May 2012, at the NATO Chicago Summit, the Afghan Government and NATO Allies added a new step to the formal Transition process, the so-called Milestone 2013: Afghans would assume lead responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan by mid-2013, and at that point, international forces would shift to playing a primarily supporting role.
- In January 2013, during President Karzai's visit to Washington, he and President Obama announced that Milestone 2013 would be reached earlier – in spring, not summer, 2013.
- And earlier this month, President Obama announced that the U.S. troop commitment in Afghanistan would draw down by 34,000 more troops by February 2014, and that by the end of 2014, "our war in Afghanistan will be over."[4]

At the same time, the timeline for the declared commitment of the international community to Afghanistan has been extended well past 2014. In November 2011, at the International Conference on Afghanistan held in Bonn, the international community pledged broad support until 2024, through the so-called decade of Transformation following Transition. In May 2012, at the NATO Chicago Summit, participants affirmed that NATO's security partnership with Afghanistan would not end with the current campaign. The U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), signed in May 2012 – a statement of mutual commitment in multiple arenas – is scheduled to remain in force until 2024. And President Obama, during his recent press conference with President Karzai, iterated that U.S. forces would remain engaged in Afghanistan after 2014, in "two long-term tasks" – albeit "very specific and very narrow" ones – including "first, training and assisting Afghan forces and second, targeted counterterrorism missions against al Qaeda and its affiliates."[5]

The juxtaposition of the rough continuity of U.S. core ends with significant adjustments to ways and means has led many to wonder whether the overall U.S. level of ambition in Afghanistan has been lowered. Others question whether current proposed ways and means are consonant with stated ends; to what extent any such lack of consonance might pose risks to U.S. national security interests; and to what extent, if any, various forms of longer-term "commitment" might mitigate any such risks.

A Framework for Decision-Making

Many of the recent debates have focused on U.S. force levels in Afghanistan: the "ramp" or drawdown curve between now and the end of 2014, and the "enduring presence" of U.S. forces

[4] See President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan, West Point, NY, December 1, 2009; NATO Lisbon Summit Declaration, Lisbon, Portugal, November 20, 2010; President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, Washington, DC, June 22, 2011; Chicago Summit Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Chicago, May 20, 2012; Joint Press Conference by President Obama and President Karzai, Washington, DC, January 11, 2013; and SOTU 2013.

[5] See Afghanistan and the International Community: From Transition to the Transformation Decade, Conference Conclusions, the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, December 5, 2011; Chicago Summit Declaration; Joint Press Conference; and Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2, 2012.

after 2014. But while troop levels and drawdown curves tend to steal the headlines, more fundamental still is the question of how coherently all the facets of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan fit together under a *single political strategy* aimed at bringing the war to a resolution that will protect U.S interests over the long term.

The following four basic questions form one possible framework for facilitating further decision-making:

- **Is it working?** Is the campaign demonstrably helping to generate the minimum essential conditions necessary to protect U.S. interests – that is, is it succeeding on its own terms? If not, then what could be the justification for spending another dollar or putting another life on the line to continue it?
- **What more needs to be done?** If the basic logic of the campaign is sound, what more would need to be done in order to achieve the minimum essential conditions required to protect U.S. interests? What would those steps require in terms of will, resources, and time? In turn, ought those steps be taken, given costs, risks, and competing exigencies?
- **Is it sustainable?** If the basic logic of the campaign is sound, and a viable way forward in the campaign can be charted, then what more would it take to make the campaign gains sustainable – and to protect U.S. interests – over the longer term? In turn, ought those steps be taken, given costs, risks, and competing exigencies?
- **How does this end?** If all other conditions are met including the logic of the campaign, its further viability, and the plausible long-term sustainability of campaign gains, how is it expected that campaign gains would inform a comprehensive conflict settlement – an end to the war? To what extent should the existence, or otherwise, of a viable approach to war termination shape decision-making about continuing the fight?

Is it working?

The basic logic of the current campaign dates to a key premise of the 2009 McChrystal assessment and the campaign plan that was developed on that basis: working with Afghan counterparts to reduce the insurgent threat while simultaneously helping Afghan forces develop at least minimal competence so that they can handle the residual threat. In particular, one of the major conclusions of the assessment was the need for geographical prioritization across the entire theater – focusing combined efforts on the same key locations at the same time and prioritizing those locations by their strategic importance. Another major conclusion was the need for concerted use of unit partnering, in which like Afghan and coalition units live, train, plan, and execute together 24/7, in order to boost Afghan capabilities, leadership skills, and confidence. In turn, unit partnering was not designed to be an end in itself – instead, the theory was that matched, equivalent partnerships would evolve over time toward Afghan self-sufficiency with minimal support from the international community.

Most Afghan and coalition accounts conclude that the basic logic of the security component of the campaign has proven so far to be sound.

The insurgencies are certainly not defeated – and they continue to enjoy the ability to recruit, as well as the luxury of safe havens in Pakistan. But by most accounts, including their own, the insurgent networks have been degraded and the costs of doing business inside Afghanistan have risen substantially – for example, some insurgents have been forced to use longer and more

treacherous transit routes, and it has grown more expensive to pay some lower-level fighters. The changes have been most marked in those parts of Afghanistan – in the south, the Taliban's traditional homeland – where the campaign has focused its main effort.[6]

In turn, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are not a monolith, and they still face various challenges. But by most accounts, including their own, their confidence – particularly that of the Afghan National Army (ANA) – is rising to match their basic capabilities, and they are taking on ever more independent operations at higher levels of organization. In addition, Afghan forces – particularly the army and the police – though they continue to harbor some institutional-cultural differences, increasingly reach out to each other, with little or no prompting from the coalition, to address challenges together.[7]

Meanwhile, the roles of coalition forces have long been evolving correspondingly. U.S. and other coalition forces on the ground have not waited for the formal announcement of Milestone 2013 – as circumstances have allowed, for more than a year now, they have been pulling back from *shona ba shona* ("shoulder-to-shoulder") partnerships, doing less themselves, playing different supporting roles over time, and encouraging Afghans to make Afghan systems work. The patterns vary from place to place but the basic theory is the same.[8]

What more needs to be done?

The work remaining to be done on the ground, by the current campaign logic, includes two main facets – continuing to reduce the insurgent threat and further developing the Afghan forces. Both target the same idea: an ANSF capable of handling the residual threat with relatively limited support from the international community.

In practice, the nature of the remaining work reflects deliberate choices made in 2009 about where and how to assume risk. Given limitations on available troop levels and other resources, choices were made to make the fight in the south the main effort, leaving less attention available for other parts of Afghanistan; and to give particular attention to the ANA compared with the rest of the Afghan forces. Those choices have produced a campaign whose results to date – as of early 2013 – vary significantly across different parts of Afghanistan and different Afghan forces.

Afghan and ISAF commanders appear generally satisfied with progress in the south though eager to consolidate and protect those gains. They express greater concerns about remaining security challenges in eastern Afghanistan. The main focus of the campaign in the east is protecting Kabul and its approaches including Highway 1, which connects Kabul and Kandahar. Another substantial requirement is continuing to disrupt the sanctuaries and transit routes of the Haqqani

[6] Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013.
[7] Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2011, 2012 and 2013.
[8] Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2012 and 2013. The year 2012 witnessed the introduction to theater of security force assistance teams (SFATs) – small teams that embed with much larger Afghan units or headquarters, to provide advisory support as well as connectivity to coalition enablers. The teams varied in composition, focus, and even name depending on their locations within the Afghan system, and on the nationality (and Military Service) of the troop contributor. By late 2012, the U.S. Army was moving to a model based on substituting Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) that include their own organic SFATs, for traditional, battlespace-owning Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) supported by SFATs sourced out of other brigades – improving unity of command. The much-smaller SFABs, with significantly reduced combat power, preclude by definition "doing it for them."

network in their traditional tribal homeland. And a further challenge is securing Afghanistan's long border with Pakistan – made all the more difficult by the fact that, of all the Afghan security forces, the Afghan Border Police have benefited the least from unit partnering with coalition forces. In addition, U.S. and Afghan officials note with concern the apparent interest of al Qaeda and other extremists in establishing a foothold in remote upper Kunar and Nuristan provinces in northeastern Afghanistan.[9] Concerning the ANSF as a whole, remaining work includes improving the effectiveness and accountability of some of the police forces; strengthening the ability of the ANSF to support themselves with their own organic enablers such as air, fires, and intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); strengthening leadership development; and bolstering the ability of Afghanistan's security institutions to direct and support the force responsibly and effectively.

"Advising and enabling" – a primary focus for remaining U.S. and other coalition forces, now and in any enduring presence – aims both to further develop the ANSF in key target areas, and, through the ANSF, to continue to reduce the threat. Commanders stress that "advising and enabling" is not an end in itself – and it does not simply mean "doing less." Instead, advising includes supporting Afghan commanders, staffs, and units by encouraging best practices, bolstering confidence, and coaching counterparts through new challenges.[10] Enabling, in turn, means helping Afghan forces gain the ability to provide and rely on their own organic enablers. Afghan and coalition officials generally agree that Afghan forces will not enjoy the same sophisticated enablers that foreign troops have – instead, Afghan forces are likely to use different equipment, to do things differently, and to choose not to do some things.[11]

Reductions in U.S. and other coalition troop levels between now and the end of 2014, and after 2014, will necessarily curtail their ability to advise and enable Afghan forces and to contribute directly to the further reduction of the insurgent threat. Some see potential benefit to the campaign from these drawdowns – both Afghan and U.S. officials, for example, suggest that the growth of ANSF confidence was catalyzed in part by the final stages of U.S. "surge recovery" and its accompanying consolidation of coalition forces at fewer bases and outposts, and the very clear message that sent that coalition forces were going home.[12]

But troop drawdowns also carry potential risk. In the near-term, each reduction curtails the extent to which coalition forces can provide support to Afghan counterparts – in geographical reach, depth of coverage, or type of support. Afghan forces might simply choose not to undertake a mission from fear of failure; to cede territory altogether as too difficult to control; to make local-level accommodations with insurgent forces in areas they do not feel confident they can control; or – altogether differently – to undertake too-ambitious operations in which they not merely fail, but fail so catastrophically that it destroys their own confidence in their abilities, or the confidence of the Afghan people in the ability of the ANSF to protect them. For the near-term 34,000-troop drawdown, a ramp that keeps most of those troops in Afghanistan through the 2013 fighting season, rather than bringing them home earlier, would tend to reduce the scope and

[9] Interviews with U.S. and Afghan officials, 2011, 2012, and 2013.
[10] Many U.S. Soldiers view those roles as similar to that of Observer Controllers at U.S. Army Combat Training Centers – who typically coach training participants through jobs that they themselves have done – while many U.S. Marines mention their own "coyote" analogue.
[11] For example, Afghans may evacuate casualties by ground, not air, when appropriate medical facilities are available. Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2012.
[12] Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2012.

scale of the risks to campaign gains that that drawdown introduces.[13]

In turn, potential U.S. force level-related risks beyond the end of 2014 would depend a great deal on developments between now and then including the timing and slope of the current troop drawdown, and the effects generated by the campaign. Post-2014 risks would also depend significantly on the balance of ANSF troop levels and U.S. and other Allied troop contributions – none of those numbers are likely to be static. Further, post-2014 risks would also depend fundamentally on how the ends – the minimum essential conditions – are defined. Will it be simply to ensure that key leaders of al Qaeda and affiliates can be eliminated if necessary? Will it be, more broadly, to ensure that safe havens cannot coalesce? Or more broadly still, to ensure that Afghans can maintain some minimum level of stability? From the perspective of rigorous strategy, the key is to map "troops to tasks" rather than "tasks to troops."

It is also important to bear in mind throughout that not all U.S. forces remaining in Afghanistan will be dedicated to the campaign. Significant efforts, and significant time and attention from U.S. leadership and troops, will be required for retrograde – the process of bringing troops and equipment home again safely. Bringing U.S. troops home from Afghanistan may prove far more complicated than from Iraq, given Afghanistan's difficult terrain, its relative dearth of transportation infrastructure, and the lack of a "Kuwait" next door to pull back to.

Is it sustainable?

Even if the campaign continues to generate gains, developments in four key arenas – safe havens in Pakistan, ANSF endstrength and funding, Afghanistan's economic viability, and Afghan governance – could put the long-term sustainability of those campaign gains, and the protection of U.S. interests, at substantial risk.

Safe Havens in Pakistan

First, many Afghans as well as a number of outside observers view the persistence of Afghan insurgent safe havens in Pakistan as the greatest long-term threat to sustaining campaign gains. The continued availability of safe havens in Pakistan gives Afghan insurgent leaders bases from which to direct operations, recruit, provide training, and receive financing, as well as the luxury of time to wait out the departure of foreign forces from Afghanistan if they so choose.

The campaign on the ground has included a fluctuating history of cooperative Afghan-Pakistani initiatives at the tactical and operational levels, facilitated by ISAF. At best, these efforts have included combined planning and – to some extent – "complementary" operations conducted simultaneously on either side of the same border. Yet while Pakistani forces have sometimes vigorously targeted their own domestically-oriented insurgencies, they apparently remain unable, unwilling, or both, to take action against Afghan insurgent safe havens in Pakistan.

While some observers view this deadlock as a showstopper – and others hope that a breakthrough in high-level political negotiations with the Taliban would render the point moot – many others suggest that the persistence of safe havens simply imposes a requirement for greater

[13] The fighting season runs from the end of the poppy harvest in the spring until the weather turns cold in the fall.

resilience of the Afghan state. Such resilience might mean stronger, more capable, and better integrated Afghan security forces, appropriately arrayed; greater competence of the overall border regime; and staunch refusal by local Afghan communities to tolerate an insurgent presence in their midst.

Key issues for Congress might include considering whether any strategic, operational, and tactical-level outreach designed to encourage Pakistani actions against the safe havens might at last yield results; and evaluating the extent to which the threats to lasting campaign gains posed by persistent safe havens in Pakistan might be mitigated through stronger and more effective Afghan institutions and practices.

ANSF Endstrength and Funding

A second major factor shaping the sustainability of campaign gains is the ability of the ANSF to provide security for the Afghan people. That includes, first of all, an overall endstrength – and a force mix – appropriate to anticipated future security challenges. At the NATO Chicago Summit, participants broadly agreed to a "gradual managed force reduction" from the current endstrength of 352,000 "to a sustainable level", with a working target of 228,500 personnel. But ANSF leaders and other officials raised concerns about the timeline and slope of that drawdown, and the latest thinking reportedly calls for avoiding a steep ANSF drawdown in the immediate wake of the end of the NATO ISAF mission. In general, too-low an ANSF endstrength introduces the risk that Afghan forces might be stretched too thinly to protect campaign gains, or that they might choose to leave some areas uncovered, or both. Drawing down too rapidly – in an anemic economy that lacks follow-on opportunities for demobilized troops who are familiar with weapons and accustomed to receiving salaries – might be a recipe for bolstering the ranks of the insurgencies, or at any rate of the deeply disaffected.

The ability of the ANSF to meet future security challenges also depends fundamentally on future funding levels – based on the continued largesse of the international community, which has clearly indicated its lack of eagerness or ability to support an expensive long commitment; or on the ability of the Afghan system to generate and collect revenues, still a tall order. The lower the levels of available funding, the greater the pressure to draw down ANSF endstrength, or to reduce other facets of the Afghan budget that might also be important for state stability, or both.

Key issues for Congress might include carefully assessing the risks associated with various options for post-2014 ANSF drawdowns; balancing the risks of ANSF drawdowns against the costs of continuing to support the Afghan force; and weighing any continued assistance against the likelihood that Afghanistan would eventually be able to shoulder the financial burden.

Economic Viability

Third, as the challenges of funding the ANSF suggest, Afghanistan's future economic viability is critical for ensuring that security gains are sustainable over the longer-term. In principle, Afghanistan's natural resources, agricultural potential, and human capital could form the basis for a viable future economy. But Afghanistan is on an ambitious timeline, trying to achieve significant economic self-sufficiency by 2024 – first of all the ability to generate, collect, and

spend revenues – and by any measure that will be a stretch.[14]

The potential risks are great: without a viable economy – or open-ended support from the international community – the Afghan state would likely be unable to meet even the most basic needs of the Afghan people, and thus to secure the people's confidence, so central to basic stability.

The history of efforts by the international community to help Afghans foster a working economy has been decidedly mixed. Years of relatively indiscriminate spending led to an array of unproductive or counterproductive results, including an inability to track money spent; the flow of assistance funds out of the country; the distortion of labor markets; investment in systems or components that Afghans did not want or could not sustain; and the empowerment of "thugs."[15]

But recent years have witnessed stronger collaboration both between the international community and the Afghan Government, and within the international community, aimed at crafting and pursuing a single shared approach. The so-called Kabul process encourages a shared focus on prioritized Afghan systems including infrastructure, transportation, financial mechanisms, the judicial sector, and human capital. A corresponding paradigm shift among practitioners on the ground has echoed the same theme with its emphasis on "making Afghan systems work."[16]

The international community, while losing some leverage as troop levels go down, has some potential opportunities to help reduce the risks to sustainability posed by Afghanistan's fragile economy. One approach would be simply providing as much clarity as possible about future forms and levels of assistance – many Afghan officials, including provincial and district governors, report that the uncertainty is deeply debilitating. Further, the international community could also continue to help Afghans establish appropriate accountability mechanisms, and to define and adhere to rigorous prioritization. It could encourage discipline within its own ranks in implementing the Declaration of the July 2012 Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan. And it could address an emerging tension in the assistance community in Afghanistan between pursuing emerging traditional development opportunities in more stable parts of the country, and protecting campaign gains in still-contested parts of the country.[17]

[14] The Afghan Government currently collects about $2 billion per year in revenues. Afghanistan's budget for solar year 1391 (which concludes at the 2013 vernal equinox) is $4.89 billion, but that includes some international support and does not include substantial off-budget assistance from international grants and loans. The Afghan Government and NATO estimate that the cost of sustaining the ANSF will be $4.1 billion per year. See Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Towards a Self-Sustaining Afghanistan: An Economic Transition Strategy, November 29, 2011; and Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Budget 1391, "What's in it for you?" 2012.

[15] Interviews with U.S., Afghan, and other international officials, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012.

[16] See Towards a Self-Sustaining Afghanistan, 2011; and Afghanistan and the International Community: From Transition to the Transformation Decade, Conference Conclusions, the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, December 5, 2011. Interviews with U.S. and Afghan officials, 2012.

[17] Interviews with U.S., Afghan and other international officials, 2012 and 2013. See the Tokyo Declaration: Partnership for Self-Reliance in Afghanistan, from Transition to Transformation, from the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan, July 8, 2012. At the Tokyo Conference, donors pledged support through the Transformation decade and affirmed their commitment to the principles of the Kabul Process.

Key issues for Congress might include determining the extent to which a viable economic foundation in Afghanistan constitutes part of the minimum essential conditions necessary to the protection of U.S. interests; and weighing the costs of possible further contributions of all kinds – including political capital and civilian official presence, in addition to assistance – against the likelihood of making a lasting impact.

Governance

Finally, most observers suggest that sustainable security in Afghanistan requires an architecture of good governance that appropriately and accountably directs the use of its security forces, stewards the nation's resources and revenues, and provides access to justice. Good governance might also be essential to foster good faith with Afghanistan's neighbors, to encourage foreign assistance and investment, and most importantly, to earn at least the tacit acceptance of the Afghan people – all of which have a bearing on the sustainability of security gains.

The challenges are deeply entrenched. Afghan state and society operate primarily on the basis of networks of power and influence. While not all Afghans lose out as a result, the distribution of patronage is uneven and sometimes deeply divisive, and it generally trumps the rule of law. These dynamics have led many Afghans to regard their own government as rapacious. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that after decades of war and upheaval, Afghanistan benefits from few of the societal checks and balances enjoyed at least to some degree in most other states.

The risks to the sustainability of campaign gains, without good governance, could be quite significant: Afghan security forces might have no credible authority to answer to, and popular disaffection with randomly distributed or non-existent state protections of all kinds could lead to societal fracturing along ethnic or tribal lines, persistent simmering conflict, or even violence.

The 2009 McChrystal assessment addressed such concerns in one of its main conclusions – that governance needed to be "on par with" security as a focus of the campaign in order for the campaign to succeed. The basic theory was that the primary arbiter of lasting stability in Afghanistan is the Afghan people – the extent to which they accept the system and are able to hold it accountable. But efforts to date by the international community have been distinctly uneven in both intent and effects. They have included attempts to define the minimal governance requirements at the district level by focusing on the *tashkil* (personnel structure); to exercise leverage to establish left and right limits for key powerbrokers; and to nudge the Afghan system into replacing local officials deemed by local residents to be truly up to no good.[18]

Meanwhile, many Afghan thought leaders have pointed to a potentially powerful remedy to help correct perceived power imbalances and the lack of accountability – the growing, and increasingly organized and powerful, voices of Afghan civil society organizations, women's groups, media outlets, private sector pioneers, religious authorities, and traditional local councils. Afghans suggest that these voices have great potential to help hold governance in check – if they are given time to develop. And while some support from the international community would be

[18] Interviews with U.S., Afghan, and other international officials, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012, and see McChrystal Assessment, 2008.

welcome – including technical and advisory support, and continued guarantees of basic security – it is Afghans who would do the lion's share of the work and indeed are already doing it.[19]

In principle, the international community could support such efforts by leveraging the Mutual Accountability Framework (MAF) – a pointed set of commitments, part of the Tokyo Declaration, aimed in part at countering corruption[20] – or at least by not pointedly foreclosing, in their rhetoric and actions, the possibility that Afghan people might contribute increasingly toward holding their government accountable.

Key issues for Congress might include weighing the potential of better Afghan civic organization of all kinds, over time, to hold governance in check; evaluating the extent to which accountable governance constitutes part of the minimum essential conditions that need to pertain in Afghanistan in order for U.S. interests to be protected; and evaluating the roles that might be played by members of the international community – not only, perhaps not even primarily, governments – in supporting its emergence.

How does this end?

Observers agree that the war is highly unlikely to end with a thunderous victory on the battlefield. And many if not all agree that it is also unlikely to end based on the gradual accretion of campaign gains on the ground. Most suggest that bringing the war to a close in a manner likely to protect U.S. interests over the long-term would require a political settlement of some kind – one that establishes the fate of insurgent leaders and fighters; the disposition of political power; the demobilization of some Afghan forces; and modalities for societal reconciliation.

By numerous accounts, efforts are now underway by multiple stakeholders to engineer a settlement, in the relatively narrow sense of a deal between the Afghan Government and insurgent leaders. As most frequently described, those efforts seek to identify common ground between the primary belligerents, and to use confidence-building measures, as steps toward a relatively near-term, high-level agreement. Yet however likely such efforts might be to achieve success on their own terms – a near-term deal – the basic approach has raised concerns among many Afghans who feel excluded from the process. A number of Afghans suggest that any such deal – between the current government, which they consider rapacious, and the Taliban leadership, which they fear – is hardly likely to provide most Afghans with an inspiring shared vision of the future.

Consequently, some Afghans and a number of outside observers have suggested that a more fruitful approach might to recast war termination as a longer-term political settlement process, one that brings to bear the full participation of the Afghan people. In such a process, based on a highly inclusive national dialogue among all key sectors of society, Afghans might agree amongst themselves on a shared future vision of Afghanistan – one that includes former Northern Alliance members and southern Pashtuns. A longer timeline might help dispel the current sense of urgency that leads insurgent leaders to up their "asks", and the Afghan leadership to seriously consider potentially detrimental compromises. And a plausible future vision – even though not yet realized – might help dispel the grim uncertainty that prompts so many Afghans to hedge, for

[19] Interviews with Afghan thought leaders, 2012 and 2013.
[20] See the Tokyo Declaration, 2012.

example by shoring up patronage networks, or seeking emigration opportunities, or acquiescing in local-level accommodations with insurgents.

Against that backdrop, the Afghan presidential elections scheduled to be held in 2014, an important opportunity for participation, might be reframed as a catalyst of the longer-term process, rather than as a deadline by which the groundwork for reconciliation must already be laid. And preparations for the elections could help mobilize the emergence of additional voices from civil society and other sectors, which might in turn contribute to an increasingly inclusive national dialogue about Afghanistan's future.

In this refined construct, the role of the international community would be a supporting one – and many roles might be played by non-governmental actors. U.S. opportunities might include emphasizing support for a broadly participatory settlement process and for an outcome that protects long-term Afghan and U.S. interests; and providing support to Afghan civil society and other emerging groups.

Key issues for Congress might include considering the extent to which a coherent and viable vision exists for bringing the war to a close; and evaluating the extent to which the form that war termination takes, and the outcomes it produces, constitute minimum essential conditions for protecting U.S. interests.

Final Word

This four-part framework cannot directly provide answers about the best way forward for U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. Nor can it help weigh Afghan war considerations against other national security exigencies or against wholly unlike concerns such as the domestic economy. It might, however, illuminate the broad range of choices that still exists – including choices about ends, as well as about ways and means. And it begs consideration of the risks – of different kinds and different magnitudes – that might attend any proposed course of action.

For those weighing the continuation of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan in some form, this framework might help refine *a rigorous political strategy* that:

- articulates a clear vision for a future Afghanistan that achieves the minimum essential conditions necessary to protect U.S. interests over the long term;
- lays out the required combination of security, economic, and political "ways and means", including how they shape one another and how they change over time, necessary to realize those minimum conditions;
- defines the distribution of roles and responsibilities among the U.S. Government, other international actors, and the Afghan Government in carrying out those ways and means, including how those roles evolve over time;
- establishes a realistic timeline for accomplishment; and
- includes a very clear-eyed assessment of associated risks.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify about these issues, and I look forward to your questions.