

Statement of Ronald E. Neumann
Ambassador (ret)
Before the House Armed Services Committee on
Risks to stability in Afghanistan
July 30, 2014

Chairman McKeon, Representative Smith, thank you for your invitation to appear before you today. Stability in Afghanistan is a topic of particular importance to me. I first visited Afghanistan in 1967 when my father was ambassador there and my wife and I traveled by jeep, horse, and yak as well as more conventional means to explore a then largely peaceful land. I have returned regularly since I retired as ambassador to Afghanistan and have made seven trips there, most recently in March of this year.

Stabilizing Afghanistan remains deeply important to our national security. An unstable Afghanistan constantly threatens to draw its neighbors into destabilizing entanglements dangerous to the whole region. It gave rise to the greatest terrorist attack on US soil. If it again descends into chaos it will menace us again.

The basic situation of today is that far too much has been accomplished to say that nothing has been done or that the situation is without hope for success. And far too little is finished to claim that success is inevitable or that we have accomplished our purposes. We are not ending THE war in Afghanistan. Rather we are ending our active combat participation in a vicious and bloody war that will go on. But as we do so we have strong interests in continuing to support a path toward stability.

We have some new and positive aspects to that end. Despite a number of white knuckle confrontations, and the probability of more before the ballot counting is finished, it appears that Afghanistan will emerge with a peaceful transition of power to a legitimately elected president. That individual will have a stronger hand to govern and to negotiate because he is broadly legitimate. Particularly important, because it is so starkly different from Iraq, is that in Afghanistan the political leaders, albeit with international help, are so far able to find a way to compromise and move forward without violence.

In a region as turbulent as Central Asia this is a considerable success. And the Afghan security forces, with 100,000 fewer foreign troops in country than in 2009, have credibly managed security through the election. By no means is success guaranteed. The insurgents are increasing their challenges. We are pushing the pace of withdrawal and cutting the margin of success very fine. Still, these accomplishments are real.

In examining areas of risk to stability I will focus particularly on those about which US policy and actions can make a difference. The major areas of challenge, as my colleagues have discussed, are in economics, security and politics. There is a linking element of psychology that will affect all three and it is particularly on that area of policy and its implications that I will focus my remarks.

Afghans and neighboring countries, friends of ours and enemies alike, pay a great deal of attention to what they think the US will do. When we are unclear they make assumptions, usually worst case, or invent theories on which to base policy. President Obama's recent policy decisions on Afghanistan need to be reviewed in that light, as do the important elements of our policy that have not been decided.

I support the decision to leave just under 10,000 troops in Afghanistan in 2015. Given that war is an uncertain business, I would have preferred a slightly larger number to provide a margin against surprise. Nevertheless, with the help of our NATO allies, other troop contributors and an improving Afghan Army I believe it is sufficient for the tasks of the next year.

However, many problems are occasioned by the President's declaring that he has already decided now—without reference to what will or won't happen on the ground—that our presence will be reduced by half in 2016 and ended by 2017 except for forces staying on under embassy control. This set of decisions raises issues about our effectiveness, about how Afghans should interpret what they may expect from us in the future, about how they impact Pakistan's own policies, and about our relations with our NATO allies and their contribution to stability.

We still need to fill critical gaps in intelligence collection and targeting, fire support, and medical evacuation before we remove our own contributions to these areas. Not to do so would be a critical moral failure on our part.

For our own forces the series of changing configurations will, I believe, take a toll on effectiveness. In the next six months our forces will need to move to consolidate their posture only to radically change it twelve months later when we shrink to a Kabul presence. Physically a lot of work is going to be taken away from advising and go into shifting out locations, functions, size and organizations. We are going to become incredibly ignorant of how the war is going once we are stuck in Kabul. But most importantly, this posture will suggest to those around us that we really have little commitment to the mission since we are going to end it on the same timetable no matter what.

Harkening back to the distant day when I was an infantry officer in another war, I can say that I would have been reluctant to risk my life or that of my men if I had been told my mission was going to end irrespective of whether I succeeded or failed. I believe our highly professional military will do its best but this is a very peculiar way to send men and women into harm's way.

What we radiate with these decisions is doubt about our intentions. Can insurgents believe we will continue to support the Afghan forces, or are further reductions in forces and financial support just around the corner? Should they negotiate or wait for the collapse that may come if the US suddenly cuts off assistance? Similar uncertainty will lead many Afghans to fight or govern with one eye to the rear, watching to see what they have to do to protect themselves if we bail out even faster than we now claim will be the case. These considerations, generated by our pacing and the uncertainty of our commitment affect stability and performance.

How US decisions on troops are to be integrated with NATO planning is unclear. We have a double interest in extending the post 2014 NATO mission—Resolute Support—beyond 2016. First, we recognize that the US troops under Embassy control will continue to have an important training mission. It is in our interest that this mission be shared with our NATO allies.

Secondly, we have recognized the need for continued foreign assistance to Afghanistan for some time to come. We want that to be a shared burden. When nations have their troops engaged in a task they are far more likely to maintain financial support than when that is not the case. So keeping an active NATO mission in place after 2016 will strengthen support for and share the burden of stabilizing Afghanistan.

But if keeping NATO is important then we need to decide on how to coordinate that mission with US forces that are to pass under Embassy control. Can this somehow be done by placing troops under State Department control also within a NATO framework? Do we need liaison officers to work between US military under embassy control and those serving in NATO? Or will we end with separate, parallel and probably duplicatory functions? These decisions are political as much as military. They affect confidence levels among allies and mission performance.

What we do know is that many NATO nations are prepared to extend their stay beyond 2016 and think it would be wise to do so. Senior German diplomats have told me explicitly that they would like to maintain their northern base beyond 2016. I believe the Italians would cooperate as well. So would others if there is a NATO decision to remain. But to stay they will need some support from us and that apparently is not decided. It should be.

Of course, extending the NATO mission requires the signature of their status of forces agreement, the NATO SOFA, modeled on the BSA and, similarly apparently ready for signature by the next Afghan president. I am utterly convinced that both documents will be signed. This will happen because both Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah are men with a realistic understanding of what Afghanistan needs for its security. They have said they will sign. I believe this is so. Hence, getting on with our planning for how to keep NATO involved and work with it should be among our priorities.

I would like now to turn to the inter-relationship of force, money, and diplomacy. We often treat these components of power as separate variables but that is a mistake. In the current electoral crisis in Afghanistan we, along with our donor nation partners and the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to Afghanistan are playing an important political role in helping the Afghans work through a political crisis peacefully. The Afghans, particularly Dr. Ghani, Dr. Abdullah and President Karzai deserve credit for this, so different from the way politics are being played out in Iraq.

But so too does our diplomacy, the steady efforts of Ambassador Cunningham, and the dynamic push of Secretary Kerry backed by calls from President Obama. There is a lot of excellent diplomacy being practiced. Yet it is important to see that the diplomacy is under-girded by the

very real threat to reduce fiscal and military aid if the crisis is not resolved. The lesson here is truly important to stability.

We need effective diplomacy. Threats alone (“you work it out or we’re going”) were not sufficient to resolve the crisis. Force wasn’t useful with our own allies. Diplomacy was essential to crisis resolution. Yet, while we are strongly engaged with diplomatic action it is because of the weight of our commitments of military and financial aid that we have real influence to use in brokering a success. Absent the intertwining of money, military support and diplomacy we would not have the successful demonstration of influence you are seeing .

The lesson is clearly illustrated in Iraq. They don’t need our money. They don’t have our military support. And we have huge difficulty influencing their (disastrous) politics.

The peaceful transition of power on the basis of an election in Afghanistan is one of the strongest signs of democratic progress in the vast region from Pakistan to Russia’s western border. But we are not out of the woods. The election has deepened political suspicions. Political parties are weak. Institutions are fragile. Whatever level of political cooperation has been agreed will be carried out with one eye constantly on future political advantage and power politics.

How the resulting political maneuvers are played out will strongly affect the next Afghan president's ability to improve internal governance, a critical issue for future stability, women's advancement, and economic and justice sector development. All these areas are fraught with consequences for stability and for the long-term success of our own nation's interests.

The more stable the government, the more room it will have for professionalizing its military and civilian institutions. The less stable it is, the more the Afghan leadership will look to political balancing among power brokers to remain in power.

We can be sure that there will be other crises. There will be a large, continuing need for careful diplomacy to help the next Afghan president work through these challenges. If, as I believe it is important to us to help and buttress that process in our own interests then we need to recognize that maintaining our aid and our presence are vital to providing the tools with which successful diplomatic outcomes can be built.

Thank you for your attention. I await your questions.

Curriculum vitae: I was a career diplomat for 37 years during which I was US ambassador to Algeria, Bahrain and Afghanistan; the latter from 2005 to 2007. I have made repeated trips back to Afghanistan since. I write and speak on the subject.

