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“Prospects for Peace: The Way Forward in Afghanistan.”

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Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Yoho, and distinguished Members of the Committee. I am honored to speak before this esteemed Committee about Afghanistan.

My name is Luke Coffey. I am the Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Most of my adult and professional life has had a connection to Afghanistan. As a junior U.S. Army officer I served in Afghanistan for one year in 2005 conducting detainee operations as part of an integrated military police and military intelligence brigade. When I worked for the British Conservative Party, and later as a top aid to the British Defense Secretary, I worked on Afghan policy issues from a British point of view. During this time I made regular visits to the country—primarily to Helmand and Kandahar provinces and to Kabul. At The Heritage Foundation I have led much of the organization’s research and publications on Afghanistan. I love Afghanistan: its people, its history, its food, and its very complex and different cultures. So it is a great privilege to be here today to talk about Afghanistan.

The situation regarding the peace deal between the U.S. government and the Taliban is a fast-moving issue. Therefore, it is important that I point out that the analysis and opinions expressed in the prepared statement are based on the events that have occurred, and the information publically available, as of March 7, 2020.

I would also like to state at the outset that I have not read or seen, in full or in part, any of the so-called secret annexes to the recent peace agreement. Therefore, my testimony is based on publically available information, off-the-record information from government officials, and years of experience dealing with Afghanistan.

The title of this hearing is very appropriate. It is important to look at the future of U.S. policy in Afghanistan in light of the recent agreement with the Taliban. But to examine the prospects for peace in Afghanistan, we have to first understand why and how we got to where we are today.

In late 2001, just after the 9/11 attacks, there were two main goals in Afghanistan. First, to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven from which to plan, train, and launch terrorist attacks on a global scale. Secondly, to remove the Taliban regime from power as punishment for not cooperating with the international community and for harboring terrorism—a sort of twenty-first-century version of a nineteenth-century British punitive raid on India’s frontier. Both were accomplished with relative speed—it can even be argued that this was achieved by the spring of 2002.

As the years went by, the explanation for what U.S. forces were doing in Afghanistan shifted from America’s raw national security needs to vague notions of nation-building and “bringing democracy.” Since 2002, the U.S. has focused on the quixotic goals of creating “a strong central government” and a “pluralistic society” in Afghanistan. We have tried accomplishing these goals by “holding free and fair” elections, “tackling corruption,” and building the “institutions of democracy.” If we fail to achieve these goals, we are presented with doomsday scenarios of

“ungoverned spaces,” the Taliban “back in power,” and the establishment of new terrorist “safe havens.”

But this black-and-white view of the situation does not work in a place like Afghanistan. It is a place with many shades of gray. There is a complex middle ground in Afghanistan somewhere between Afghanistan becoming a Jeffersonian democracy or the Taliban ruling over the country like it did before 2001. This is where we are today—and where we will likely be for the foreseeable future. As long as America and its allies remain safe, this middle ground should be accepted.

For years, especially in the earlier days of the war, successive U.S. commanders rotating in and out of the country on an annual basis thought that if just one more road could be paved, one more school built, or one more hospital constructed, America could leave Afghanistan just that much better. Over the years, this focus on nation-building—however well intended it might have been—resulted in expectations set so high in Afghanistan that even obvious successes on the security front were not considered good enough.

This created an impossible situation for the U.S. military. With the lofty goals of nation-building defining our success in the early days, the only thing most people see today in Afghanistan is failure.

Few in the United States believe that we have been defeated in Afghanistan. They just think we have not met the objectives they expected to be achieved—and that what we have achieved has taken too long and cost too much.

This is not an unreasonable view. We have been fighting in Afghanistan for almost 20 years and will likely have some form of involvement there for at least 20 more. This is a long time. It is possible that an eighteen-year-old soldier serving in Afghanistan today was not even born at the time of the 9/11 attacks.

As of the time of this hearing, 2,315 soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and Department of Defense civilians have been killed, more than 20,000 have been wounded, and just shy of \$1 trillion has been spent. Like many veterans of the Afghan war, I have felt the impact personally. Over the course of the past 19 years I have lost classmates, colleagues, and friends in Afghanistan. On August 16, 2009, my sister-in-law’s brother, U.S. Army Sergeant First Class Brian Woods from my hometown of Catawissa, Missouri, died from wounds he sustained fighting in Afghanistan. The price to the American family and the price to the American taxpayer has been great. We should not forget this.

Has America Succeeded?

You often hear that it was all for nothing or that the Taliban are on the front foot. Or that they are making huge advancements across the country. But the reality shows us that this is not the case. The Taliban today is nothing like the group was in the mid-1990s when it was seizing major cities like Kandahar in Kabul with tanks and military aircraft. On September 10, 2001, outside a small rump of territory run by the Northern Alliance in northeast Afghanistan, the Taliban

controlled the entire country. At this time the Taliban controlled every major population center including the capital city and all major road networks.

After being ousted from power in December 2001 the Taliban has never genuinely threatened the capital city of Kabul. The group has never held a provincial capital.

The situation in Afghanistan is often described as a “stalemate.” But a stalemate means gridlock—it does not mean parity. Only twice has it seized a provincial capital (Kunduz in 2015,¹ and Ghazni in 2018²), and in each case it was incapable of holding the city for more than a few days. Ever since the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction stopped releasing their assessment on how much territory and what percentage of the population in Afghanistan is controlled by the government, the Taliban, or is contested, it has been difficult to assess who controls what in the country.

However, one can get a reasonable idea through various open-source reporting. On the more optimistic end of the scale, the Afghan government claims that the Taliban is in full control of 22 districts. On the more pessimistic end of the scale, The Foundation for Defense of Democracies’ *Long War Journal* claims that 74 districts are under the full control of the Taliban.³

These figures are a matter of considerable debate, but if we split this down the middle we can assume that around 48 districts are under the Taliban’s full control. This represents only 11 percent of Afghanistan’s 421 districts. Considering that the Taliban controlled 90 percent of the country when the U.S. invaded, and at best now controls just over 11 percent of the total districts, it is unclear to me how this is not anything but a success. When will the critics be happy? When the Taliban only controls 5 percent of the districts? 3 percent? Or no districts at all?

It is also worth pointing out that no transnational terrorists group, including al-Qaeda, operating from Afghanistan has successfully attacked the United States since September 11, 2001.

After almost 20 years of military involvement, maybe we should come to terms with the fact that until there is a genuine political settlement between all warring parties, and until Pakistan stops providing succor to the Taliban, what we see in Afghanistan might be as good as it is going to get. This is not defeat. It is the cold reality.

What the Taliban *has* proven adept at is killing civilians and security forces with suicide attacks and roadside bombs. But just because a suicide bomber detonates himself in a crowded market place does not mean America has failed in Afghanistan. As a nation we have to recalibrate our expectations on what is achievable in Afghanistan and we need to stop treating every tactical victory of the Taliban as symbolic of America’s strategic defeat.

¹Joseph Goldstein and Mujib Mashal, “Taliban Fighters Capture Kunduz City as Afghan Forces Retreat,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/29/world/asia/taliban-fighters-enter-city-of-kunduz-in-northern-afghanistan.html> (accessed March 5, 2020).

²W. J. Hennigan, “Exclusive: Inside the U.S. Fight to Save Ghazni from the Taliban,” *TIME*, August 23, 2018, <https://time.com/longform/ghazni-fight-taliban/> (accessed March 5, 2020).

³Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, “Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan> (accessed March 5, 2020).

Understanding the Mission Today

Most of the criticism of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan today derives from a misunderstanding about the current mission there. Terms like “America’s longest war” do not accurately describe the U.S. mission in Afghanistan or take into account how it has evolved over the years. The international military mission in Afghanistan is no longer a major U.S.-led combat operation, but a mission designed to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).

The situation today in Afghanistan bears little resemblance to 2001, when the U.S. invaded and ousted the Taliban, or to 2009, when President Barack Obama announced a surge in force levels, which peaked at more than 100,000 troops.

Today, there is a relatively small contingent of about 13,000 U.S. troops—the vast majority of whom are training and mentoring the ANDSF. (This total will soon be 8,600 troops in accordance to the peace agreement recently signed.) A small number of these troops conduct high-end special operations to target senior Taliban leadership, remnants of al-Qaeda, and the nascent Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), but these missions are the exception rather than the rule.

There is also a major difference in America’s financial commitment. At the peak of U.S. involvement in 2011, the U.S. government was spending \$120 billion a year.⁴ In its fiscal year 2020 budget request, the Department of Defense “identified \$18.6 billion in direct war costs”⁵ in Afghanistan. That is less than two months of spending at 2011 levels.

Analyzing the Deal

It is right and proper that the Trump Administration pushed for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. The Afghan government, with the help of the U.S. and international community, has been fighting a Taliban-led insurgency. History shows that most insurgencies are successfully brought to an end through some sort of political settlement. After all, the most basic goal of any counterinsurgency campaign is to allow those who have political grievances the ability to express these grievances through a political process rather than through violence.

After a seven-day “reduction in violence” period in Afghanistan, primarily between U.S./international forces and the Taliban (and to a lesser extent the Taliban and Afghan forces), U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban co-founder and chief negotiator Abdul Ghani Baradar signed a peace agreement in Doha, Qatar, that resulted from more than a year of on-and-off formal talks.

In my opinion, the comprehensive agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban is built on three main points.

⁴ David Rogers, “Pentagon Seeks \$120B in War Funds,” *Politico*, January 7, 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/01/pentagon-seeks-120b-in-war-funds-047206> (accessed August 2, 2019).

⁵ Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, updated January 31, 2020, p.11, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf> (accessed August 2, 2019).

First, the Taliban agreed that it will not allow al-Qaeda or any other transnational terrorist group to use Afghan soil. To this end, the Taliban agreed to “guarantees and enforcement mechanisms” to make sure this remains the case. However, it remains unclear how the so-called guarantees and enforcement mechanisms will work in practice.

Second, the United States and its allies agreed to a timeline to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan. Within 135 days, U.S. forces will drop to 8,600—roughly the number of troops in Afghanistan when Trump entered office. About 13,000 U.S. troops are there now.

International forces will reduce their troop presence proportionately. Then, if the U.S. assesses that the Taliban is living up to its end of the bargain, the remaining U.S. and international forces will withdraw nine and a half months later.

Third, and most importantly, talks within Afghanistan between the government and the Taliban will take place sometime later this month.

This is the most crucial stage in the peace process. **There will be no enduring and meaningful deal unless there is an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In the long term it matters less what the U.S. agrees to with the Taliban; what matters most is what the Afghan government agrees to with the Taliban.**

During intra-Afghan talks the U.S. needs to let Afghans (including the Taliban) decide their country’s future. However tempting it might be for U.S. policymakers to weigh in on any future power-sharing arrangement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, it must leave the most contentious issues—such as prisoner exchanges, social issues, and possible amnesty—to the Afghan parties, and the Afghan people, to resolve peacefully.

Many questions about the peace agreement remain unanswered. And healthy skepticism is only natural under the circumstances. But, ultimately, it is for all Afghans—those who support the government in Kabul and those who identify as Taliban—to settle their differences.

In my opinion there are three key issues resulting from the agreement with the Taliban that need attention.

The first issue that needs to be addressed immediately is the contentious issue of prisoner swaps between the Afghan government and the Taliban. There has been much written about this issue in the media. And there has also been a lot of misunderstanding. Both the U.S.–Taliban peace agreement and the U.S.–Afghan government joint statement, mention a possible prisoner swap. However, the former agreement mentions a possible prisoner swap in more detail than the latter agreement.

The U.S.–Taliban agreement states that “up to”⁶ 5,000 prisoners could be released by the Afghan government to the Taliban and that the Taliban will release 1,000 prisoners to the Afghan government. Whereas the U.S.–Afghan government agreement only states that there will be a

⁶U.S. Department of State, *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2020).

determination to assess “the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides.”⁷ This difference in verbiage has resulted into a lot of confusion.

The releasing of prisoners under Afghan control is not a competency of the U.S. government. Therefore, the U.S. government is in no position to make a commitment to have these prisoners released. But a careful reading of the U.S.–Taliban peace agreement shows that the U.S. is only promising to facilitate “a discussion” on the issue of prisoner swaps as part of a confidence-building effort. Considering that the mention of prisoner swap is made in the U.S.–Afghan government joint statement, it is only logical to assume that the government in Kabul is aware of this matter.

The United States needs to work with the Afghan government to clear up any confusion about the issue of a possible prisoner swap with the Taliban. Prisoner swaps are as old as warfare itself. In conflicts throughout history prisoner swaps have been used as useful confidence-building measures. Ultimately, it is up to the Afghan government and the Taliban to determine how many, if any at all, prisoners they wish to swap.

The second issue that needs addressing in more detail is how the so called guarantees and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the Taliban does not reestablish links with al-Qaeda or other transnational terrorist groups will work in practice. Since the prevention of Afghanistan becoming a safe zone for transnational terrorism is the number one U.S. priority in the country, it is important that the United States government explains what the guarantees and enforcement mechanisms will be as soon as possible.

The third issue that needs addressing in more detail is how the United States can continue to support the Afghan security forces after the 14-month deadline expires and all U.S. and international troops withdrawal from Afghanistan. The U.S. government should remain committed to the financial assistance it provides the Afghan government for its security forces. Compared to what the United States has been spending to conduct military operations in Afghanistan, the cost to the U.S. taxpayer of funding the Afghan security forces is miniscule.

When Russia stopped funding Najibullah’s regime in 1992, the Afghan air force was grounded due to lack of fuel, and Afghan army desertions increased by 60 percent due to lack of pay and food shortages. This established the chaotic conditions in Afghanistan that, in part, helped to bring the Taliban into power in 1994. NATO should learn the lessons of Afghanistan’s recent history and ensure that the Afghan National Security Forces are fully funded and capable.

Also, if American and foreign troops are not allowed in the country, the United States should be working with neighboring countries, most likely in Central Asia, to find a way to train Afghan soldiers in the region. A best-case scenario would be a good idea for the Afghan government to negotiate with the Taliban some sort of continued international military presence to continue the training of the Afghan security forces during the intra-Afghan talks.

⁷U.S. Embassy in Qatar, *Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, U.S. Embassy Doha, February 29, 2020, <https://qa.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/136/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2020).

U.S. Goals Looking Forward

U.S. long-term goals in Afghanistan can be summed up with four “S”s:

- **A sovereign Afghanistan.** In South and Central Asia, sovereignty equals stability and peace. This means respecting the sovereignty of others while begin able to defend and enforce one’s own sovereignty. Today, outside countries like China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia are eroding the sovereignty of Afghanistan by meddling in Afghanistan’s internal affairs.
- **A stable Afghanistan.** The main goal of the international community in Afghanistan, if nothing else is achieved there, should be to create a stable enough Afghanistan that is able to maintain its own internal security, in order to prevent the country from becoming a safe haven for terrorism in the way it was in the 1990s, without the help of thousands of foreign troops.
- **A self-reliant Afghanistan.** Afghanistan has been the recipient of hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars in international aid. While this is necessary, and in some form or another Afghanistan will need some international assistance for the near future, providing the current levels of support for Afghanistan is unsustainable in the long term. Whether it is with security or the economy, the international community must find ways to help Afghanistan become more self-reliant.
- **A settled Afghanistan.** Successful intra-Afghan talks are important to the country’s long-term success. The goal of any counterinsurgency is to allow those who have legitimate political grievances to address these grievances through a political process and not through violence. If the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan ever ends, it will be through a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Going forward another important aspect of the enforcement of the deal will be transparency. The Administration received a lot of criticism during the earlier stages of the talks with the Taliban for failing to engage with our Afghan partners and our NATO allies. This resulted in quite public criticism from senior members of the Afghan government. However, it seems that the U.S. has learned from this experience and over the course of the past several months has done a great deal to engage with our Afghan partners and our NATO allies. Going forward, it is important that the U.S. continues with this interaction with our partners both in Afghanistan and around the world and makes the process as transparent as possible.

Conclusion

So what does success look like in Afghanistan? Success in Afghanistan is not when 100 percent of its districts are under the complete control of the Afghan government or when there are no more suicide bombings. Nor is success in Afghanistan achieved when every road is paved, every girl goes to school, or everyone gets the right to vote. These things are very important in themselves, and we should aspire to them, but they are neither the reasons why we went to

Afghanistan nor the reasons why we should remain there. While these Noble objectives are very much part of the campaign they are not the reason for the campaign.

Success is achieved when there is a stable enough Afghanistan—when it is able to manage its own internal and external security to a degree that stops interference from outside powers, allowing the country to resist the establishment of terror bases that were there before. Nothing more and nothing less.

The American public has every reason to be proud of what the U.S. military has accomplished under very challenging circumstances in Afghanistan. It is time that we have a dose of realism of what to expect in Afghanistan and lower our expectations on what is achievable for the future. Afghanistan will not be perfect or suddenly become some Switzerland in the Hindu Kush. Unless you are some idealistic dreamer who has never stepped foot in the country, this was never the goal.

For the rest of my life, there will be an insurgency in some form in the Pashtun heartland of the country. This does not mean that the United States has failed. It is simply a reflection of the reality on the ground and in the region. India, arguably the world's largest democracy, fights insurgencies inside its borders today. The British fought an insurgency in Northern Ireland until the mid-1990s. In January three men were arrested in Northern Ireland linked to an attempted car bomb⁸ and another was arrested for plotting to blow up a ferry traveling between Northern Ireland and Scotland on Brexit Day (January 31, 2020).⁹

The Afghan military is far from being perfect, but that was never the goal. The goal is to get the forces to a capability where they can manage the insurgency themselves, without tens of thousands of western troops on the ground. Paraphrasing Lawrence of Arabia on the Arabs in his famous *Twenty-Seven Articles* of 1917: it is better that the Afghans do it tolerably than we do it perfectly. This is why it is important that the U.S. works with the Afghan government to ensure that training and financial assistance remains available even if all international forces depart Afghanistan.

The United States needs to make crystal clear that if the Taliban backtracks on any part of the agreement, there will be consequences.

The U.S. also needs to make clear to the Taliban, and to the international community, that the legitimate government of Afghanistan is an important partner for the U.S. and that we will not abandon them.

Many ups and downs will follow in the next few months. Progress will not be made quickly, at times it will look like the talks will break down, and it is possible that the negotiations will get

⁸“Three Northern Ireland Men Arrested after Driver Travels with Bomb on Front of Car,” *Belfast Telegraph*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/three-northern-ireland-men-arrested-after-driver-travels-with-bomb-on-front-of-car-38999382.html> (accessed March 5, 2020).

⁹Rory Carroll, Henry McDonald, and Matthew Weaver, “Dissident Republicans Suspected of Brexit Day Plot to Blow up Ferry,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/06/northern-irish-dissident-republicans-suspected-of-brexit-day-plot-to-blow-up-ferry-belfast-docks> (accessed March 5, 2020).

nowhere. A great example of this was the defensive airstrike the U.S. conducted last week in Helmand province after the agreement was signed with the Taliban.¹⁰

With each successful Taliban attack, the inevitable headlines immediately appear about America's failures in Afghanistan. But we cannot start seeing every tactical victory of the Taliban as America's strategic defeat. The U.S. must be strategic and must show patience during the next several months.

For the Afghan people who have suffered more than 40 years of war, and for the American family and taxpayer that has sacrificed so much over the past 19 years, this peace plan is a realistic, responsible, and reasonable approach.

As a young Winston Churchill said in 1897, when he was fighting as a British army officer on what is the modern-day Afghan–Pakistan border:

There are no general actions on a great scale, no brilliant successes, no important surrenders, no chance for a coup de theatre. It is just a rough, hard job, which must be carried through. The war is one of small incidents. The victory must be looked for in the results.

Some things never change. What was true in 1897 is as true in 2020.

Our involvement in Afghanistan has not been pretty and there will be setbacks in the coming months regarding the intra-Afghan talks—as Churchill reminds us: “It is a rough, hard job.”

As long as America and its allies remain safe, and as long as the Afghan people are at peace, this process is well worth a shot.

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¹⁰Samantha Beech and Devan Cole, “US Conducted Airstrike on Taliban Fighters Following Attack on Afghan Checkpoint,” CNN, March 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/04/politics/taliban-airstrikes-afghanistan-us/index.html> (accessed March 5, 2020).

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