

Statement of Ambassador Douglas Lute
Hearing: "Prospects for Peace: The Way Forward in Afghanistan"
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation
Foreign Affairs Committee
United States House of Representatives
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, thank you for this opportunity to appear today to discuss Afghanistan. In this statement I will briefly outline my views on the vital U.S. interests at stake, the recent agreement between the United States and the Taliban, and some thoughts on way forward.

As background, I served for six years in the White House under Presidents Bush and Obama, helping to coordinate our efforts in Afghanistan and the region. More specifically, I was involved in 2010 in our first direct diplomatic contact with the Taliban Political Commission based in Doha, Qatar, and oversaw with others our continued outreach to the Taliban through 2013 when I moved out of the White House and became the U.S. Ambassador to NATO.

Let me begin my statement today where all U.S. policy discussions should begin: American national interests. In my view, the only vital American interest at stake in Afghanistan is to counter terrorist groups that have the potential to strike the United States, its citizens and its treaty allies. Indeed, this purpose mirrors the original purpose of our intervention just weeks after 9-11 in 2001, and it remains the core reason for our effort over the past 18 years. Of course, we have other, less than vital interests in Afghanistan which this committee may wish to discuss, but the essential purpose for the United States is to counter terrorism.

In my estimation, we have largely achieved our counter-terrorism objective today. Al-Qa'ida is much diminished in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with most of its senior leaders killed and those who remain marginalized. The threat from al-Qa'ida and its affiliates is greater elsewhere, including Yemen, Somalia, and Syria. There is a branch of the so-called Islamic State in Afghanistan, but I have seen no evidence that it presents a threat to the U.S. today and it is under pressure from the Afghans, including from the Taliban. This potential threat should be monitored.

I begin with this point about America's vital interest because that interest is at the heart of the recent agreement with the Taliban. The agreement could be retitled "an agreement on countering terrorism" because that is what is actually promised. In return for the gradual withdrawal of American and allied forces from Afghanistan the Taliban agree to take steps to ensure that transnational terrorists will not operate from Afghanistan. On these points the agreement is the most significant step forward in the past decade.

The agreement, however, does not deliver peace. While it is a step in the right direction, the path to peace will be long and extremely difficult. We are likely years away from an agreement among all Afghans, including the Taliban, on how Afghanistan will be governed and when violent conflict will end. While the United States and other international players can set the stage for such progress, only Afghans can deliver the compromises required to bring to an end to the past 40 years of conflict. It is up to Afghans to decide if they wish to compromise and step forward together or to continue to fight in a winner-take-all struggle.

In the near-term several questions arise that will signal the prospects for peace. First, is the withdrawal of American forces really “conditions-based,” or will it follow the letter of the agreement on a 14-month timeline? Second, today, March 10th, the agreement calls for release of prisoners on both sides, but the Afghan government has not agreed to this release. What impact does this early disconnect have on the longer-term prospects? Third, and perhaps most difficult, can the Afghan government form a coherent, inclusive negotiating team that is capable of engaging seriously the Taliban? Again, the agreement calls for such intra-Afghan talks to begin today, the 10th. These three questions are early signposts for whether the recent agreement will lead to deeper, more durable solutions to the Afghan War; in short, whether the current agreement will be a catalyst, a precursor to a true peace agreement.

What can the United States do to influence events going forward? First, we must test the Taliban’s commitment to fulfill the recent agreement. We have must hold them to their obligations, especially in regard to counter-terrorism. Second, we need to press the Afghan government urgently to form an inclusive team and move into negotiations with the Taliban as the agreement suggests. This means the political elite must come together despite the continued disputes surrounding last year’s presidential elections and further broaden a team to represent all major elements of Afghan society, including women. We have influence with the Afghan government and we must use it -- including providing about 75% of the Afghan national budget. We will need to sustain this economic support to sustain our influence. Finally, it is time to internationalize the diplomacy in search of peace in Afghanistan. It is right that the United States took the lead in crafting the initial agreement with the Taliban. Now is the time to bring our allies and partners more prominently into play. For example, there are reports that Norway will host intra-Afghan talks. The international community will need to continue to support Afghanistan financially. We should seek a United Nations Security Council resolution in support of the peace process, bringing both Russia and China onboard. Finally, the likely long and difficult path toward peace requires a UN-appointed senior diplomat to guide the parties. These steps can improve significantly the prospects for peace.

Thank you. I am ready to respond to your questions.