

**Prepared Testimony  
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**The US Presence in Afghanistan post-2014: Views of Outside Experts**

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INTRODUCTION

Many members of Congress as well as the American public are deeply concerned about the prospects for the women of Afghanistan, and rightly so. For Afghan women, the gains of the last decade are under threat. Key issues for Afghan women include the prospects for the stability of the country as a whole, the protection of their own safety and basic rights, their ability to participate in political and civic life, and to access basic needs including healthcare and education. The conditions that will meet the fundamental needs and aspirations of Afghanistan's women are substantially the same as those that will keep all Afghan citizens secure from risk and threat – maintaining sufficient security in the country to counter the threats of criminality, extremism and civil and regional conflict.

Achieving stability and security is not only in the interest of Afghan women, but in the key long-term interest of Afghanistan, and of the United States. In this testimony I will consider components to stability and security, how the post-2014 US presence can underpin them – and draw attention to any risks that could undermine the process.

In Section 1, I review the current context for the security and stability challenge. I consider in turn: why confidence is so central leading into and beyond the 2014 watershed, what type of commitment is required to maintain this confidence, and how a false dilemma between a perpetual war and a “Grand Bargain” has detracted from attention to a more nuanced set of policies. In Section 2, I consider the gains that have been made and the opportunities to consolidate and maintain these gains, together with the nature of the risks and threats to US and Afghan interests in the years ahead. In Section 3, I will address the policies that could counter these threats in the areas of security, politics and economics.

1. BACKGROUND

a. Confidence

As many astute participants and observers of Afghanistan have noted, the critical ingredient for stability leading to and beyond the 2014 watershed is *confidence*. Afghan leaders and citizens alike are ready to assume the responsibility of securing

and governing themselves. To fulfill this responsibility, they need the confidence that their partners will stand by them and maintain the commitments that have already been made to them, through the commitments made at Lisbon, Chicago and Tokyo, and in the Strategic Partnership Agreement.

The greatest ally of the United States in Afghanistan is its citizenry: the vast majority of Afghans who are moderate and law-abiding, and want the same stability and security for their own families that will also satisfy the interests of the US and the broader international community. A wise civic leader from Afghanistan once observed:

*"We have 95% ordinary people, 4% thugs, and 1% extremists, perhaps as in any country. The problem comes when outsiders focus on the 4% and 1%, and cut a deal between them, overlooking the interests of the 95%."*

The real foundation of stability will come from this moderate middle, which will bear the burden of maintaining order and countering extremism, if they have sufficient confidence. These are the people who form the basis of the Afghan Security Forces and their families, the state institutions, the businesspeople, front line service providers and civic actors who keep the country working. Polled numbers today are not as overtly pro-American as they were in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. Nonetheless it is the moderate middle who look for stability, rule of law, and order, not necessarily those who are overtly pro-American, that will provide the bulwark of stability.

#### b. Commitment

How can the United States and Afghanistan's international partners bolster, rather than undermine this confidence? It is through standing by commitments that have already been made, and making enduring commitments to Afghanistan's security sufficient that Afghans can shoulder the burden of securing and governing themselves. The Bilateral Security Agreement could form a foundational element of such a commitment post 2014. It is not strictly necessary, however, as existing legal frameworks suffice to permit an international presence. Should negotiations on the BSA fail to reach a satisfactory final conclusion, this should not in itself be considered fatal to securing a long-term commitment to the country and its region.

Perhaps as important as the legal agreements are the international statements of commitment to Afghanistan's survival as a state. When Afghans hear talk of long-term commitment, they are willing to stand firm and take the risks and actions that mean that stability is likely to prevail, and those commitments are unlikely to be called into action. When they hear that the US wishes to withdraw completely from the region, talk of a "zero option", or talk of concessions made in negotiations that will close the space for ordinary citizens to live and operate, this leads to hedging behavior that cause the unraveling of institutions and stability. To Afghan ears, it echoes hauntingly with the story of abandonment of the region that followed the victory of the Mujahideen over the Soviet presence, and the end of the Cold War.

To reinforce Afghanistan's ability to defend itself over the medium term, both continued financial and material support to the ANSF- until such time as the domestic revenue of Afghanistan can cover the essential costs of the force - and a residual international force will be required. This force should not take a front-line combat role – which has now been assumed by Afghan forces as of the completion of the Transition process. But it should be present to provide back-up and support, as trainers and mentors, as reinforcements and to provide a deterrence to those who might wish to challenge the survival of the Afghan state and the integrity of Afghan territory. It is the threat of use of force, rather than actual use of force, that is likely to have the highest value.

A civic leader who has mobilized hundreds of thousands of citizens to counter extremism called me to ask whether the US is going to stand by its commitments. If so, he said, then my colleagues can keep their work going. If not, he said, then we might as well go into exile now, as we are sure to be overwhelmed. When there is talk of abandonment, Afghan citizens close their businesses, sell their houses, send their families into exile, and cease to confront the extremism and criminality around them. In security, as in finance, fear of collapse is often the key element that actually precipitates collapse.

There is an important distinction to be made between the United States' continued commitment to Afghanistan's security and viability as a state, and the United States' ongoing direct involvement in a war. It is possible to end the US's direct and leading role in a war, whether defined as a war on terrorism, extremism, or insurgency, and let Afghans take the front role in the domestic wars and struggles that they will inevitably face in the years to come, while still maintaining a commitment to the security of the country, as the US has with dozens of countries all over the world.

The United States' involvement in Afghanistan has been characterized as a decade long war, but for those living in the country, it is a different case. There was a three week war in 2001 that saw the collapse of the Taliban government and its flight into exile. Then there was a several year effort, variously characterized as humanitarian assistance, security force assistance, and counter-terrorism, that looked little different to efforts in Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Colombia or Southern Sudan. It was drastically under-resourced. The Bush Administration had vowed that there would be no nation-building, preferring to meet US security interests through a minimal presence of counter-terrorism operators in the countryside. To those who would advocate similar security plans now, I think the first step would be to look back at similar plans and assess how well they worked in the past. Minimalism and partnering with unsavory warlord militias did not work; security declined, and US involvement in a war was restarted with a decision in 2009 to commit troops for a limited period to a counter-insurgency campaign. Current suggestions to maintain security through a minimal counter-terrorism force in the countryside appear similar to the security posture of 2002-4, that saw the Taliban regroup and re-emerge. The fragile Afghan State was unable to withstand the onslaught. Recasting

our understanding of the United States' varied involvement over the last decade in a more nuanced way might allow for a more objective consideration of the policy instruments that have worked and might work in the future.

c. “Grand Bargain” versus “perpetual war”

Talk of US involvement in Afghanistan is sometimes reduced to two extremes: either perpetual war, or striking a “Grand Bargain” with the Afghan Government’s primary opposition forces, the Taliban. As argued above, framing the US engagement primarily through a war footing is not necessary or appropriate. It is rather commitment to the Afghans’ own ability to counter the threats that they will face that is the critical factor. Furthermore there are important factors other than security force assistance that will bolster stability over the medium to longer term, in the political, economic and civic domain that are important complements to robust security forces.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who argue that the “Grand Bargain” will end the war and bring stability to Afghanistan. As the centerpiece of a political strategy, it is highly unlikely that such a bargain is attainable, or if reached, will endure, or if it endures, will provide a basis for moderation and stability. Such a pursuit has been based on flawed analysis, seeking an end to hostilities in bringing a proxy group to the table, rather than addressing Pakistan, on the terms that will satisfy their underlying concerns. The armed opposition has no incentive to reach a deal before Transition, with a Government they perceive to be lame duck, and an international commitment they perceive to be departing or at least waning. They are unlikely to be able to govern so as to address the factionalism and criminality that threaten stability. Further, it is the very pursuit of such a bargain that has helped undermined the confidence of those who are opposed to extreme ideologies, and the institutions and forces needed to counter them.

There is a paradox that a so-called “peace deal” would likely not bring an end to war, and also that an end to war will come without a deal; and thus the pursuit of the deal has been a red herring. It is without question that a political strategy is required to bring stability and counter the threats in Afghanistan – and without it military force will be rendered useless – but it is an alternative political strategy that will both honor the gains that have been made, go some way towards meeting the interests of the 95%, and counter the risks and threats that confront both Afghan citizens and the international community.

## 2. GAINS, OPPORTUNITIES, RISKS AND THREATS

What are the elements, then, of a strategy that could consolidate and maintain the gains that have been made and counter the threats to US and Afghan interests in the years ahead? First, I will consider the nature of the gains that have been made, and the threats that are faced. Then I will address the policies that could counter these threats, across security, politics, and economic engagement.

a. Gains of the last decade, current opportunities

The media has tended to focus on the negatives and challenges. While these challenges are real, this narrative has overshadowed the substantial gains that have been made. Foremost among these have been the re-establishment of state institutions. The ANSF has made remarkable progress, and the core functions of the executive are robust – relative to many countries in the world. Health, rural development, telecommunications, finance and agriculture ministries form and execute policies. Between 2000 and 2012, Afghanistan climbed the Human Development Index faster than any other country, rising on its indicators at an average annual rate of 3.91%. A Parliament has been formed, and a vibrant media is largely free of censorship. Compared to the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the trust of people in the state is high. As important as the institutional gains, are the attitudinal changes. A new generation has come of age, forming the basis of a moderate, middle class who wish to protect and defend these gains, and see the extremist trends in the region as an existential threat to their lives.

Opportunities for US interests in Afghanistan include: (i) the prospect of a relatively democratic and stable state which is a US ally in the region, in between a nuclear power to its east and a potential nuclear power to its west, (ii) in a next generation which is moderate and tolerant, and vested in order and stability, as a bulwark against extremism and criminality, (iii) the real and symbolic value of seeing the enormous investments made result in a degree of order and prosperity rather than unraveling, and (iv) providing catalytic investments in economic growth that could see Afghanistan move rapidly towards revenue self-sufficiency.

b. Threats and risks

Despite the gains, many challenges remain. The most evident threat to peace and stability in Afghanistan is the armed insurgency, of which the foremost grouping is the Taliban. Careful analysis shows that the insurgency is composed of several groupings, including the Haqqani network, and localized militia groupings. Many of the violent incidents against the Afghan Government, NATO forces and Afghan citizens have been discovered to be factors of criminality and disputes over land, water and other elements.

As argued by many leading political actors and analysts, the insurgency may not be the greatest threat to stability in the country and region, and may have overshadowed our focus on other risks and threats, which include:

1. The failure of the political elite to adhere to political practices that will lead to a peaceful transition to a new regime that will be a responsible steward of Afghanistan;
2. The failure of non-violent groups within Afghanistan to agree on a formula for shared governance of the territory;

3. The criminal activities of various armed and non-armed groups, including those linked to state institutions, that prey upon ordinary citizens, business actors, and the activities of the state;
4. Fostering of extremism, particularly through spreading education and ideology among the youth of the country.
5. Pakistan's policy of destabilizing the Afghan state and maintaining strategic depth through its proxies, which are provided safe havens on Pakistan's territory;

A strategy to promote stability and the viability of the Afghan state over the medium to long term will need to take all these factors into account.

### 3. POLICY

#### a. Security

Commitment to Afghanistan's internal security and ability to defend against threats from its neighbors is the most important element of maintaining stability. In line with the US strategy for the last several years, building and maintaining Afghan National Security Forces so that they can meet internal and external threats is the key means of maintaining stability. Considerable ground has been made, with a force 330,000 strong, able to operate as the lead in security operations, and inspiring the trust of the majority of the population.

The US will remain the cornerstone of such a commitment: without US leadership others will not step forward. To be effective and credible, the commitment needs to be manifested in three ways: first through the legal and political commitments, including the SFA that has already been agreed, and if possible, a BSA. Second, through material support to fund and equip the army. I will defer to others as to the nature of this support, but it seems quite clear that air capabilities whether operated by Afghan or international forces will be essential to counter the threats for some time. Third, through policy commitments to back up the forces should contingencies arise which threaten the state's integrity and survival.

#### b. Politics

As described above, there has been a tendency by some analysts to argue for a political track that is centered on reaching a "Grand Bargain" between the Afghan State and its opposition. I will argue instead for a political strategy that in my view carries a far higher likelihood of protecting US interests and the hard-won gains of the last decades. It rests on a number of blocks, most of which are already in place and so do not require new policies or resources, but rather a difference in emphasis.

The first element seeks to address the foremost political risk to the viability of the political order: the transition of political power from one regime to the next in 2014. This will require a focus on both the process and outcome of the election. Some will argue that the US and its partners have no business in the elections; the reality is

that the US, as the major underwriter of the state and funder of the elections process is already an influential actor in this activity – at issue is how it chooses to use this influence. Getting the process right requires the reality and appearance of a fair playing field. It will also require civic education for the population that stresses the individual's right to form a personal choice; a careful examination of the chain of custody of votes; and sufficient support to voter monitoring groups to scrutinize this chain of custody. In a context where some actors are likely to have private militias and deep pockets from illicit activities, a fair playing field will require a minimum floor of public financing – perhaps in the range of \$5m for each ticket, together with in kind facilities - to allow candidates access to transportation, media and advertising. The nature of the outcome will obviously have deep impact on the future characteristics of the Afghan State and the ability of the country to cohere and consolidate security. Characteristics of a winning slate that would be in the interests of the majority of Afghans and their international partners would be: ability to form a broad-based, cross-ethnic ticket that would unite rather than divide the country; and ability to formulate and execute a credible agenda for governing. Whether or not Afghanistan's political elite can overcome their fragmentation and rivalries to field such a team or teams is still an open question. Even if a winning ticket is not a perfect one, building an inclusive agenda, and a broad-based team of ministers and governors around the winning team will be critical for the stability of the country.

The second element seeks to address the second risk – the failure of non-violent groups to agree on a formula for governing Afghanistan. A successful elections process could, through political dialogue, consensus-building and deal-making, go some way towards reaching such a formula. However, elections can also be divisive and exacerbate competition between individuals and groups. Whereas negotiations have been commonly framed as between the government and insurgents, perhaps a more important set of negotiations are those between the different ethnic and other groupings that are non-violent, on how they can put aside their differences and work for a viable future for the country. There have been important steps taken towards this set of negotiations, in the shape of a “National Dialogue” that has framed a set of core political questions that Afghans need to confront or reach agreement on. While a formal process is desirable, perhaps running alongside the elections process, others have pointed out that Afghans are engaged in a national dialogue every day. Nonetheless, some encouragement and facilitation of this process could be critical to keeping it on track.

The third is to bolster the legitimacy and capability of state institutions, and counter the criminality that so threatens this legitimacy. State institutions – like the ANSF – do not need to be perfect, and discussions among Afghanistan recognize that their process of transformation will take another decade, and the burden of this efforts rests on their shoulders. But the better they function, the more they can shoulder the burden of securing, governing and confronting the security challenges within the country. Much progress has been made in establishing and reforming state institutions, but with considerable frustration, setbacks and expense. Much of this expense is driven by an unsustainable model of aid and technical assistance that

often back-fires and exacerbates the very goals it is meant to pursue. A real challenge lies ahead in formulating the conditions for a more lightweight and coordinated means of providing technical assistance. A critical factor will be the commitment of the political leadership to an agenda of rule of law and nurturing institutions. The experience of Plan Colombia, and specifically the Colombian Government's agenda of rule of law, in rallying the people and countering both insurgency and criminality, can perhaps provide if not a blueprint, some relevant examples.

The fourth challenge is to address the growing extremism at the margins and among the youth of the country. Perhaps surprisingly, countering extremism among citizens has not been a major policy goal of the last decade. There are lessons from around the world of programs that work and those that work less well. Engaging the education systems to ensure the reach and type of education will be an essential plank in this regard; other types of outreach can be effective. Maintaining the space for the moderate middle, and a vibrant civil society and media, and engaging with and supporting civic groups ranging from professional associations, to youth groups and religious leaders is another critical platform for stability.

The fifth is to address relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Many argue that Pakistan's policy of the last years has been to seek to prevent the consolidation of a stable Afghan order, and to provide sanctuary and even support to an insurgency against the Afghan State. The medium to long-term stability of the region will rest on Pakistan's willingness to accept a sovereign and stable Afghanistan and relinquish any support to armed factions as a means of controlling or influencing its neighbor, in accordance with international law. This will likely not happen for some time, and will depend on advances in India-Pakistan relations, but there are steps that can be taken towards a "reset" of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, many of which are already underway. Afghanistan could do much to reassure Pakistan that the national government will respect Pakistan's legitimate interests in the region, including taking into account and taking steps to reassure Pakistan's concerns regarding encirclement by India, and establishing confidence building measures between Afghanistan's new government and Pakistan's civilian and military leaderships. Further, Afghanistan could take steps that advance Pakistan's economic interests, including facilitating access to cheap electricity and gas in the Central Asian republics through Afghanistan. In turn, Pakistan could be asked to adhere to international law in respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbor. These discussions naturally take place within a broader regional context. A framing of promoting regional stability – rather than pursuit of specific short-term goals – is likely to provide a common framework that satisfies the interests of major regional powers including China and India, as well as the US.

Armed groups are normally asked to put down their weapons if they are serious about participating in negotiated peace settlements and ongoing democratic processes. The post-2014 transition offers the balance of incentives and checks to ensure that if this process occurs it does so on realistic and practical terms. The



correlative of seeking power within a democratic state is to surrender to that state's monopoly of force.

c. Economics

The sooner the Afghan State can collect sufficient revenues to pay for its own security and other programs, the less it will depend on the international community. This strategic goal of enhancing domestic revenue should be prioritized over other developmental goals, many of which should wait until such time as the Afghan State can resource them. The exception to this should be support to security and stability, life-saving humanitarian assistance, core social programs that provide basic health, education and assistance to the marginalized, and those investments that have an ROI that put Afghanistan closer to the goal of self-sufficiency.

What are the elements required for Afghanistan to increase and ultimately reach revenue self-sufficiency? Customs revenue from cross-border trade, and taxation of citizens and businesses provided \$2.2bn out of \$4bn regular (non-military) expenditures in 2012. Business growth that can augment the taxation base include commerce and industry, agriculture and mining.

Much attention has been paid to the extractives sector. While skeptics are right that seeing some mines reach profitability is years away, there are also some near term opportunities that can start Afghanistan on a real path towards revenue growth. In particular, the hydrocarbons sector shows great potential, with revenues from sites already tendered or in process of tendering that could provide \$1bn / year revenue within the decade, and more if the governance of the sector has an intensified focus. Mining revenues would come on top of this, and would also have the major benefit of catalyzing and subsidizing the infrastructure especially in power and transportation that would benefit the wider Afghan economy and society. A focus on mining should be complemented by one on light industry and agricultural production and processing. Mining will not provide large numbers of jobs, but the agriculture sector currently provides 80% of the employment but only 20% of the share of the economy.

Integrating Afghanistan economically within its region, through extractives investment as well as regional energy, trade and transportation corridors, will not only bear economic returns in the form of growth, jobs, and increased revenue, but also pay political dividends. If both China and India are vested in Afghanistan for economic dividends, this will also provide dividends in stability. India and China have already each made major commitments to Afghanistan's growth through both public and private investment. Near term opportunities for regional integration also include a regional energy grid, that will take power from the Central Asian Republics that are willing to sell excess power produced by their hydro and gas-fired facilities at very low prices, through Afghanistan, to the energy-hungry Pakistan and India. As the Central Asian Republics are winter-peaking and South Asia summer-peaking, this power trade carries even more logic. This is not a call for large US-funded aid

projects: the Asian Development Bank and private investment can in my view carry the costs of investing in the transmission line.

## CONCLUSION

Afghanistan has moved through cycles of instability, invasion, internal conflict, and eventually, post-conflict neglect as the spotlight shifts. In turn that neglect has generated renewed instability - and the cycle has repeated itself. The challenge, post 2014, is how to break the cycle, and transition to long-term stability. What role should the United States play to bolster such a transition? How should it best allocate its resources to achieve this? How does such an objective align with the United States own objectives, both in Afghanistan and in the wider region?

Answers to those who question why this matters are amply provided by the lessons of recent history. The vacuum left in the post-Soviet period, and the inexorable slide into factions, with rival warlords and eventual civil war, created an environment ripe for the emergence of the Taliban and their government - which provided shelter for international terror networks. A neglected and unstable Afghanistan is simply not an option that the United States can risk again.