

Testimony  
THE MISSION SHOULD DRIVE THE NUMBERS  
House Armed Services Committee  
US Presence in Afghanistan Post-2014 – Views of Outside Experts  
By  
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Chairman McKeon, Representative Smith, thank you for inviting me to appear today. The subject of how the US presence is constructed post-2014 is truly important. It directly affects the issues of success or failure in Afghanistan for which I and so many others have labored, for which some have made an ultimate sacrifice, for which billions of tax payer dollars have been spent and for which many thousand Afghans have also lost their lives and limbs. Sacrifice creates a cost but it is not a sufficient reason to continue sacrificing if there is not a reasonable chance for success. But neither is pain and fatigue--of which the American people are showing advanced symptoms--a sound basis for policy.

*Summary of recommendations:*

*We need to think of the post-2014 presence in terms of events that will take place, actions we can take to undergird success, and how we react to success, failure, or problematic Afghan performance.*

*The April 2014 Afghan presidential election is crucial to success. We should be pressing Pakistan to reinforce the border, planning for election observers, instituting a brief increase in air support to increase Afghan ability to secure the vote, and publicizing our support for election training. We should also be clear on consequences if the electoral calendar is significantly breached or the election is disastrously mishandled.*

*Governance is a key part of future success. We have demanded improvement but lost credibility through lack of follow-through on our statements of conditionality. Change before the election is unlikely but we should institute some level of pain so that we prove our seriousness now, not when a new government is trying to take hold after an election.*

*It is essential that we maintain a minimum civilian presence outside Kabul to manage program oversight and evaluation of developments in governance.*

*On the security mission personnel needs must be related to greater clarity about what the mission actually is. Train and advise can mean many things. I believe we need to be present at all corps and frequently in the brigades. Building the Ministries of Defense and Interior is also essential. Although this probably means US forces in the 10-13,000 range the immediate issue for Congress is to demand that means be logically linked to ends. Further, there are multiple parts of the security mission and each needs to be clearly defined and linked to required resources.*

*Some support and logistical elements are not finished and part of the responsibility is ours; we need to fill some gaps for a transitional period and we need a plan for how these forces will be ramped down.*

*Counter terrorist forces with a mission outside Afghanistan possibly should be considered on their own merits and not counted against a ceiling built around support for the Afghan mission.*

*Afghan forces need to be held accountable for cleaning up corruption and implementing merit promotions. We should be prepared for various cuts if these actions are not taken. We need not go into a frenzy of retaliation but we need predictable retaliation for lack of performance and threats need to be implemented. [End Summary]*

Much of the current debate seems to take simplistic forms; “all is lost so we should leave now” is one such. It is based heavily on the contention that Congress will run out of patience and defund the exercise soon so we should quit first. On the other side we hear that “the mission,” often not well defined, requires such-and-such a level of forces but the discussion has left few able coherently to understand how troop numbers are related to missions. In the face of these many voices I would like to clarify my views on four basic issues and then explain my reasons for the views summarized above.

On basic issues let us be honest. We are not “winding down the war.” We are reducing but not eliminating our presence in a war that will continue. The President’s policy calls for us to continue to train, advise and fund that fight. Thus we need to clarify and detail what we intend to achieve with the continuing forces.

Second, I do believe that there is a continuing and important strategic objective to be gained in moving Afghanistan towards stability and away from a descent into the chaos that could destabilize all of Central Asia and Pakistan for decades and give new life to extremism, particularly of al-Qaeda. I do believe that these risks are real.

Third, I do not believe that these dangers are worth any cost in lives or dollars to the United States. Political reality is that we will not endlessly pay and that realization must be part of policy.

Fourth, on the basis of repeated trips to Afghanistan, including two this year, I think it is still possible at reasonable cost to achieve a sustainable Afghan state.

What this brings me to, however, is that it is a mistake to think of the post-2014 presence in fixed terms of dollars and people for fixed years. Rather, I think that we must think in terms of a series or cycle of actions that are going to take place, driven by both our desires and Afghan performance. We need to tailor our involvement to these actions, first to give each one the best chance of succeeding but subsequently to react to failure as well as the potential for progress. I think it is possible to look out two or three years in this manner, albeit with

decreasing certainty. However, the relationship of action and staffing to policy needs to begin now, not post-2014. Present decisions for post-2014 need to relate to what happens in the next year and not be determined in the abstract.

The events I see as determinative are the Afghan presidential elections of 2014; the development of better governance after that election; how we state and resource the military mission post-2014, which is now defined in such general terms as to be inadequate for military planning and useless for political reassurance to Afghans; the need for transitional support as the last of Afghan combat support and logistics systems are built; and our willingness to reduce what we propose to do if Afghans will not carry their own share of the responsibility. Each event has actions we can take to increase the chances of success. And each event has actions for which we need more clearly to hold Afghans accountable.

Our civilian presence will be a comparatively small part of the total but is critical for project and policy oversight. Thus it also needs careful examination. Some missions need to be seen as joint rather than separate.

The immediate test is the Afghan presidential election of 2014. It is critical that it lead to a new president who has sufficiently broad legitimacy to be able to lead a majority of the Afghan people and reassure the international donors. This is a significant opportunity to show friends and enemies that our strategy is succeeding and to breathe new hope into donors and allies alike. Ultimately, this test can only be met by Afghan political leaders. If they fail we will need to consider a faster departure with less assistance. Since that is a political reality of our own domestic scene we might as well gain the value of clarity by making it a staple of our policy statements. Doing so would help to focus Afghan energies that are already aware of the possibility of chaos if the election is a failure and are seeking a measure of political consensus. This is a result devoutly to be desired. Since it is one spurred by fear then making clear that the fear is well founded is all to the good.

At the same time we should do as much as we and the allies can to support a successful election. There are some modest signs of progress. The Afghan parliament has finally passed essential electoral laws that President Karzai signed, a new voter registration process has begun and vacancies in the various electoral bodies are being filled. None of these were certain to occur even two months ago.

There are four steps we should consider. First we should continue substantial support for the electoral bodies and training. Greatly enhanced publicity about what we are doing will help show Afghans the seriousness of our support for the election. Such publicity will not amount to interference since it is directed to process, not who wins.

Second, we should consider a modest, time-limited increase in military support for the electoral period, particularly in fixed-wing and helicopter aircraft. The Afghan security forces are going to have to handle security for the election but intensified airlift and combat air to provide essential support would give them greater reach and far more chance of success.

Third, we should press the Pakistan government to deploy large numbers of troops to the border to reduce infiltration during the election. They have done this before and it helped. We should be prepared to be clear, initially in private, that failure to do so will be a hostile act resulting in serious reductions of aid and that we will compensate for a lack of Pakistani troops with increased air strikes in border areas whether approved by Pakistan or not.

Finally, we should plan for and encourage donor governments and organizations to send election monitors. Realistically, foreign monitors will not be able to operate much outside the major metropolitan areas. But by being closely linked to Afghan monitors they can give far more voice, publicity and force to the latter than they can have by themselves. Domestic monitors are the real eyes and ears of an election as my colleagues in the democracy business always assure me. But without the foreigners to provide an amplifying megaphone they can also be shoved aside and ignored as one voice among many that will clamor in a post election.

We should be making it clear that if the electoral calendar is seriously breached or if for some reason the election is not held all our commitments, including those already reached like the strategic partnership, are null and void and we expect our troop presence and financial assistance to decline rapidly. This is a result that virtually every American observer believes would happen under such circumstances so we might as well draw the benefit of being clear about it in advance.

From the election to the end of 2014 will be an important period of governance. It is pointless to expect better governance between now and the election. No western government I know, and certainly not ours, would expect to make major and painful political reforms in an immediate pre-electoral period. But after the election is different.

We do need to understand that a new government will likely be a coalition and will need some time to get organized. It is likely to be weak initially. But since time and US domestic political patience are running out we have to demand more coherence. And we will have to do so at a time when we have lost credibility through repeated demands and assertions of conditionality that have not been backed up by action. This means we will have to inflict some serious pain to regain credibility. Pain could take a number of forms from cutting salaries at the Presidential palace to abruptly cancelling some particularly valued projects but we need to make these decisions coldly, and for political effect and not in a fit of anger or in a spirit of bureaucratic defense against the latest finding of the Special Inspector General.

There is a possibility that an election might go well. New ministers will be appointed and new opportunities to improve governance will arise. In that case we should be thinking about some modest ways to help the new government. One way would be to implement some painful conditionality now—fully understanding that the Karzai government is unlikely to change—so that we can both demonstrate seriousness of purpose now and have the possibility of beginning our relations with a new government on a more supportive basis by relaxing pressure for a time.

One further decision now is critical to the events of the next year and our posture post-2014 and that is clarity of the security mission. This has three parts, what is needed to train and advise, what is needed for support, and what we intend for essentially US-only counter terrorist goals. The first part of the mission—training and advising—has no visible public definition and seems to be still a matter of contention within the administration. If, as I believe, it is necessary to train at the higher staff functions and help get the support services moving better and integrated into operations, then we will have to be consistently present at corps levels and fairly frequently in contact with Afghan brigades. Advising at those levels is critical for influencing operations, increasing coordination among Afghan security forces, improving combat support, and accurately assessing what is happening in the war.

This has consequences for positioning of aviation assets, reaction forces, staffing and headquarters. My understanding is that such a mission would take somewhere in the neighborhood of 10-13,000 US troops with NATO nations contributing accordingly but, frankly, the opinion of a civilian outside the policy process on specific numbers is not worth much. What the congress must demand are clear answers from the administration about what missions it seeks to achieve and how the numbers decided on support those missions. At present there is a serious danger that the numbers will be decided on a political basis alone; a process likely both to lead to policy failure and an unforgivable loss of American troops' lives without a reasonable chance of success in their mission.

One piece of the advisory mission concerns strengthening the key ministries of defense and interior. We have varied over time from substantially under-resourcing this task to trying to achieve everything at one time. The Administration should make clear what it sees as key tasks over time, how this relates to military and senior civilian advisors (some of whom should come from other NATO states) and how this might be ramped down over time. Selecting civilian and military advisors with the right skills will be as critical as the numbers. Experience in other countries suggests that the development of ministerial competence is a long-term task. It should be approached carefully and not jammed into whatever is left of an arbitrarily selected number. Support for women in the Afghan forces is important for certain aspects of security and needs to be part of our program.

These numbers should not be for all time. We should expect and demand Afghan improvement and this should be geared to an expectation that we will reduce advisory teams over some defined time. That time needs to be set and a follow-on mission defined so that the public has some sense of what is being asked.

At the same time, numbers must be linked to far clearer reporting on progress and our strength needs to be at least partly a function of performance. One of the greatest weaknesses in the Afghan military in my observation is the excess of political balancing in senior ranks to the detriment of quality and merit. While there are limits on what we can demand of Afghan sovereignty there are also limits to what incompetence for Afghan political purposes can demand of our treasury. We should not demand perfection or even massive improvement all

at once. But we should make our own assessments of the numbers of truly incompetent senior Afghan officers in important jobs. We should make that assessment clear to the Afghan authorities, and we should be prepared to reduce our funding if it does not show modest improvement from year to year. At the same time, improvement should be publicized and celebrated by keeping up the funding levels. This is another way in which dollars and personnel should be related to performance, both positive and negative, and not defined in a policy vacuum. If performance falls so should the dollars and the mission should be altered accordingly. Again, we need to set the benchmarks now and not tailor the reporting to defending a budget.

A second area of troop strength refers to support services; enablers in military terms—logistics, air force, helicopters, casualty evacuation and so on and their integration into operational support. The criticism of inadequate Afghan progress is somewhat unfair. We only made the decision to create these forces in 2009 and work began later. When I visited Afghanistan in 2010 all military briefings I received, and there were many, made clear that the construction of enablers would not be completed before 2016 or 2017. That we later changed our goals to focus on 2014 is true but failing to be ready at a time never contemplated and never possible is neither an Afghan nor a US military failing.

Because we have changed the goal posts I believe we have a responsibility to fill some of these gaps for a limited period of time. Casualty evacuation aircraft ought to continue some support of Afghan forces until at least some greater ground evacuation and a forward casualty receiving system has a minimum chance to develop. Where our own contracting procedures have delayed the arrival of transport aircraft we should help fill the gap for a year or two beyond 2014. Once again, as a civilian outside the decision process I cannot provide the numbers. I can say with certainty that there are a small number of critical support functions we ought to maintain for a few years, that they can be steadily diminished, that Congress should insist these be defined or their lack justified, and the numbers of personnel be derived from the description of mission. What should not happen is to let these critical questions go unanswered.

Again, while I believe we have responsibilities, so too do the Afghans. There is a serious problem of corruption. One example is in the Afghan air force. That this is not cleared up is a top-level political problem. Therefore, if there is not radical improvement in this regard there should be cuts. However, they should occur where they are meaningful, perhaps in the budget for presidential security, salaries, presidential air fleet, or some similar place. The point in all of these examples is that we need public reporting, predictable retaliation for lack of performance, and the threats need to be carried out. It is the public linkage of cause to action that needs to be established over time to raise our credibility. At the same time, the number of demonstrations needs to be kept limited so that it is clear we are seeking reasonable improvement and not simply suffering from excessive and unrealistic demands based on “a period fit of morality” (with apologies to British author Thomas Babington Macaulay from whom I have borrowed the expression).

A third force component is counter terrorist forces. To the extent that their mission focus is outside Afghanistan it is not clear to me whether it is part of our Afghan strategy or ought to be considered separately as part of our worldwide counter terrorist operations. In the latter case the numbers of personnel should be considered separately rather than competing within some narrow ceiling with the Afghan mission.

The civilian presence post-2014 will be much smaller than now but needs careful consideration as well because it is directly related to oversight and understanding what is happening in governance. Right now it is clear from my visits that as our military and civilian presence is contracting, so too is our understanding of what is happening in the country. Without understanding we will be less and less able to know either how our money is spent or how best to prioritize how we use our remaining influence. Afghan governance operates at all levels and is experienced by most Afghans in their daily lives. Understanding something of what is happening at this level is critical to our ability to judge political support for the government. Reporting is thus inextricably linked to sound policy. This poses two related but different problems; one about security and one about oversight.

The post-Benghazi fears of loss are increasingly paralyzing our diplomacy. We need not be suicidal or confuse diplomats with soldiers but neither can we learn what we need to make sound policy with a policy of zero risk tolerance. We must keep a modest political reporting presence in various parts of Afghanistan. Diplomats on the ground must have some freedom to make risk-benefit calculations about when to go to meetings without being constantly second guessed or having to risk their careers in addition to their lives. What is more, we need to continue to invest in the language and cultural skills of the officers we have in the provinces. Personally, I think we would do much better with a third of the numbers if they stayed three times as long and had twice the training they get now. Where they cannot move much they need large representation budgets to host Afghan visitors in Afghan fashion, thus becoming an accepted stop when a variety of characters pass through. They need to rethink how and where to meet so that essential Afghan contacts are not shamed and embarrassed by our security screening. This is difficult but it is not impossible as I have seen in Algeria, Afghanistan, and Iraq; all critical threat posts. We need far more creative partnerships between military and civilian personnel. With fewer personnel, missions of training and doing political and economic reporting need to be shared. All this is less about the numbers of personnel than about how we conceptualize, train, deploy and support them. However, it does tie into the second task of oversight.

This is a problem that the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan has identified. As personnel levels fall our capacities for oversight decline as well. Yet to translate this into only providing economic assistance that we can directly oversee would be to confuse ends and means; aid would be largely separated from purpose and reduced only to what would fit into the procrustean oversight bed no matter how far removed from strategic goals. Squaring this circle is going to take creativity more than numbers. On the one hand we, especially USAID, will need to refine our measurements of progress; improvements need to be measured in what children learn rather than how many schools are built, in how ministries function and the

quality of their work rather than in the numbers of sub-projects completed. These are actually very difficult judgments to make. They need intellectual effort first. Then they will need dedicated USAID staff with the capacity to do this work, not just contractors. Our present process of setting goals for which we then ask contractors to devise means and then try to supervise through multiple indirect layers is unlikely to respond to the current challenge. I think that any really coherent answer on the number of USAID personnel will come only after this sort of rethinking takes place. But to do that will require help and intellectual cooperation from Congress to come to acceptable answers.

It is possible as some analysts predict that the mission will fail, either because Afghan forces are not up to the task, the politics remain deficient, or our will and our money give out. But this is much too far from certain for us to bolt now. At the same time however, the centrality of Afghan performance is too critical to ignore. It is particularly important that we understand that our actions are major drivers of Afghan actions. Therefore we need above all to show that our actions are related to what happens on the ground.

We need to spell out now the mission we expect to undertake in 2015 and the numbers we would use to accomplish this but be frank in saying we will reduce certain aspects if Afghan performance in key areas is not sufficient. The mission needs to drive the numbers. If required numbers for the mission are too large to be politically supportable then the administration needs to change the mission, not play word games with insufficient numbers. Our lack of clarity on both mission and numbers is increasing destabilization in Afghan politics, leading many to assume failure and thus ignore performance or governance in order to save for themselves whatever they can. Our inability to connect purpose to numbers is increasingly and directly making any success less likely.

We need to differentiate a short-term gap-filler support mission from a longer-term advisory and training mission. Some of the fixed-wing combat and transport support probably can continue to be based outside Afghanistan; for example in the Gulf as some now is. This will affect both costs and numbers. Once again, clarity of mission should drive numbers, or at least provide enough clarity to make the discussion coherent.

We need to do everything we can to make the election a success while making some painful reductions now on the basis of corruption so that our message of consequences is clear. We need now to come to closure on a civilian presence adequate to political reporting and some measures of oversight. I would guess that such numbers outside Kabul could be small if we pay attention to training, collocate with the military, leave our people on the ground more flexibly in making security decisions, and keep a minimum number in place long enough to become real experts.

Whatever side of the Afghan policy one is on, I hope the Congress in general, and this committee in particular will encourage and press the administration to provide you with the clarity about mission and its relationship to numbers to allow staffs to have a coherent understanding. People like to talk about strategy and goals. In pedestrian terms this is all



about how means relate to ends; whether the two are logically connected, whether there is a reasonable case that the means are sufficient to ends, and whether there is sufficient information to decide that one or the other must be adjusted if the policy is not working. That discussion is not yet happening. I hope the future political discussion in this town and this building will be worthy of the sacrifices we ask from our civilian and military personnel who have and will serve in Afghanistan. Thank you for allowing me to appear. I will be happy to respond to questions.

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