

**CDRUSFOR-A Opening Remarks for HASC Hearing**  
**Tuesday, 2 February 2016, 1000**

V8

words 3,300 (20 minutes)

- Good morning Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, and other distinguished members of this committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today while representing the servicemen and women of United States Forces-Afghanistan. I've been honored to lead and represent them and all that they do for nearly 18 months. It has truly been a privilege to do so.
- I'd like to begin by thanking the committee for your steadfast support of our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and civilians. Due to your leadership and commitment, they continue to be the best trained and equipped force our nation has ever deployed. Their remarkable performance bears testimony to your backing, and the backing of the American people.
- I'd also like to recognize the unsung heroes of our nation: our military families. They have stood by us for the last 14 years of conflict. They endure the hardships of our frequent absences, and allow us to focus on our mission. Without their love and support, we couldn't succeed. We thank them for their continued support.

UNCLASSIFIED

- Finally, I'd like to acknowledge and honor the over 2,200 servicemen and women who have died in Afghanistan since 2001, and the over 20,000 who've been wounded. Tragically, we recently lost six US Airmen to a motorcycle-borne IED attack just before Christmas, and a Special Forces advisor just after the New Year. These losses remind us that Afghanistan remains a dangerous place, and while we take every measure to reduce force protection threats, our service members, civilians, and coalition partners remain in harm's way.
- We also remember the fallen of the Afghan security forces and the loved ones they've left behind. They now bear the brunt of this conflict as they fight to bring peace and security to Afghanistan. Every day, we honor their memories by assisting our Afghan partners as they fight to improve security, and by extension help us to protect our own homeland.
- The men and women I serve with have not forgotten why we are in Afghanistan. We remain there to ensure that another terrorist attack—originating from Afghanistan and directed against the U.S. homeland—will never happen again. That is why the counterterrorism mission remains critical to our mutual security interests. Yet we recognize the importance of our train, advise, and assist mission as we build a sustainable Afghan security force capable of standing alone in its mission of countering violent extremism and denying terrorist safe-haven. This is a shared vital interest among Afghanistan, the United States, and the international community. Those who serve in this

UNCLASSIFIED

mission understand that Afghanistan is worth our investment. It is their commitment that keeps us focused on our vision for a stable and secure Afghanistan. Together, the train, advise, assist efforts coupled with our counterterrorism mission underpin our overall mission.

- Just four months have passed since I last appeared before this committee. Even in that short time, there have been many developments in the security situation, the progress of the Afghan government and its security forces, our coalition's commitments, and of course, the US way ahead in 2016 and beyond. Today, I will speak to these developments and answer questions you may have on the state of our efforts and the overall situation in Afghanistan.
- Specifically, I'd like to address the lessons we learned from last year, how we intend to ensure that 2016 is different from 2015, and how we see 2017 and beyond. To assess these questions, we must ask ourselves: "what else can we do to enable the Afghan Security Forces?" And, "What else can the Afghans do for themselves to secure their country?"
- 2015 was fundamentally different than previous years of our campaign. It is important to remember this context as we assess our efforts in Afghanistan. First, Afghanistan's government and security forces have managed multiple transitions in 2015. Second, the US and coalition mission and force structure have significantly changed. And third, changing regional dynamics, including

evolving threats, have presented both challenges and opportunities for our success.

- As I travel around Afghanistan, I recognize the changes and the progress made over the years of this mission. This is my third deployment to Afghanistan over the span of the last 14 years, and I have served as the senior commander there for the last 18 months. I am ever mindful of how far we've come, but remain clear-eyed about the challenges that lie ahead. Now more than ever, the United States should not waiver on Afghanistan. The crucial investment we are making provides dividends that achieve our strategic goals, secure our homeland, and position us well in the region—a region that has been a source of terrorism and instability for decades.
- Many of you have heard me say that for every bad news story we hear coming out of Afghanistan, there are ten good news stories we don't. While this is to be expected, I think it tints the view of our progress and prospects for success in Afghanistan. It is my intent to provide a balanced assessment that not only exposes the challenges that lie ahead, but also illustrates our gains and Afghan progress.
- With that in mind, I would like to address the concerns over what many feel is an overall declining security situation in Afghanistan. The situation is more dynamic than a simple yes or no answer would adequately address. In fact, as

of last week, the units we have on the ground throughout the country report that of the 407 district centers, 8 (or 2%) are under insurgent control. We assess that another 18 (or 4%) are under what we call insurgent influence. Often, these district centers are in remote and sparsely populated areas that security forces are not able to access very often in force. Additionally, at any given time there may be up to 94 district centers (around 23%) that we view as “at risk.” These figures make two clear points: 1) that approximately 70% of the inhabited parts of Afghanistan are either under government influence or government control; and 2) the importance of prioritizing Afghan resources to ensure key district centers do not fall into insurgent influence or control.

- Over the last eight years the Afghan security forces have made advancements, beginning as an unorganized collection of militia and developing into a modern security force with many of the systems and processes of an advanced military. They have proven resilient and continued to make significant strides in only the second year in which Afghan forces assumed the lead for security throughout Afghanistan. They have demonstrated the ability to successfully conduct effective, large-scale, multi-pillar clearing operations across the country, including in Helmand, Ghazni, and Nangarhar. Following insurgent offensives, the Afghan security forces were able to re-take key territory—as they did in Kunduz—with strong performances from all security pillars.

UNCLASSIFIED

- Simultaneously, while the tactical units were conducting these operations, the security institutions had to continue developing the force. This includes many complex tasks such as budgeting, force generation, personnel management, and national level maintenance, logistics and procurement. These are areas that challenge even the most advanced militaries in the world. I like to say that what we have accomplished here is akin to “building an airplane while in flight.” And while these systems are far from perfect, the foundation has been laid and we continue to advise and assist the Afghans as they build a sustainable security force that is enduring and capable of standing on its own.
- With Afghans in the lead for security for the first time in 2015, the enemy and the naysayers predicted the collapse of the Afghan security forces and the Afghan government. They sought to capitalize on it. Instead, the Afghan security forces fought for the very survival of their country and held firm, they did not fracture, and kept the insurgents from achieving their strategic goals, while inflicting higher casualties on the enemy. They did this while maintaining a significantly higher operational tempo with significantly reduced Coalition support.
- However, the lessons learned in 2015 underscore that Afghan shortfalls will persist well beyond 2016. Capability gaps still exist in fixed and rotary-wing aviation, combined arms operations, intelligence collection and dissemination, and maintenance. More prominently, one of the greatest tactical challenges

UNCLASSIFIED

for the Afghan security forces has been overcoming the Afghan Air Force's extremely limited organic close air support capability. Admittedly, we began building the Afghan Air Force late and are constrained by the time it takes to build human capital.

- Those capability gaps notwithstanding, I still assess that at least 70% of the problems facing the Afghan Security forces result from poor leadership. Minister of Defense Stanekzai recognizes this. To date, the Afghan National Army has replaced 92 general officers, including the 215th Corps commander in Helmand. The MoI is lagging behind in making leadership changes, but we are taking steps to remedy this through our train, advise, and assist mission. This kind of change takes time.
- I have seen that the consequences of Kunduz and Helmand still weigh heavily on the leadership of both the security forces and the Afghan Government. They realize that, although not strategically significant in a pure military sense, those incidents shaped media coverage and undermined confidence in the government. Their desire to do better runs deep and is genuine. In many ways, these events forced a greater sense of urgency to make the changes they greatly require.
- Over the last year, there have been many positive trends. However, Afghan security forces have not consolidated significant gains of their own, nor

defeating the insurgency across Afghanistan. Suffice it to say, their performance this year was uneven. To be fair, this was not unexpected, given the overall conditions.

- Ultimately, Afghanistan has not achieved an enduring level of security and stability that justifies a reduction in our support in 2016. That is why the President's decision to maintain current force levels through most of 2016 was welcome and important. This decision set the example for NATO, encouraging other Allies and partner nations to maintain, or in some cases increase, their contributions to the Resolute Support mission.
- During this winter lull, we are focusing on steps to best prepare the ANDSF for summer campaign of 2016. The leadership of the Afghan security forces share this focus and they are dedicated to resetting the force, by implementing reforms to improve training, equipping, and rebuilding of units that have endured unusually high operational tempos for long periods of time, especially those forces in Helmand. Such reforms are critical and are taking root with the Afghan security forces, but broader reforms remain important to success in Afghanistan.
- The Afghan government, including its security institutions, continues to show progress in battling corruption, and achieving other reforms such as gender integration. However, much work still needs to be done. We fully understand



that many want to see more progress on social and human rights issues before continuing to commit resources to Afghanistan. The National Unity Government also recognizes this and has welcomed our increased use of conditionality to usher change. They understand the importance of stability, opportunity and hope – the hope that inspires people to stay in Afghanistan instead of seeking opportunity elsewhere.

- *Afghanistan is at an inflection point.* I believe if we do not make deliberate, measured adjustments, 2016 is at risk of being no better, and possibly worse, than 2015. To place this in context, I would like to emphasize the uniqueness of 2015 and some dynamics I think we should soberly consider as we assess our way forward.
- The enemy has also changed this year. Unlike previous years, the Taliban extended the fighting season, and has continued to conduct operations in Helmand, as called for by Taliban leadership. Even so, the Taliban recognize they have no lasting gains to consolidate from last year, and cannot afford to cede the limited ground that they do hold. They are also coming out of a year that saw fracturing of their organization, loss of legitimacy competition from other insurgent groups, and high casualty rates—probably their highest in years.

- As I meet with Afghan soldiers and police, I remind them that the Taliban are not 10 feet tall and bullet proof. They face significant challenges and they can be defeated. This fact is often forgotten in prominent media reports. The brief notoriety the Taliban gained in Kunduz and Helmand is still overshadowed by the significant cost of those efforts, which is compounded by the loss of credibility and unity as enemy infighting continues.
- The Taliban's public narrative in Afghanistan is waning too. It is not lost on the people of Afghanistan that the Taliban are killing Afghans—security forces and innocent civilians alike. Recent public information campaigns have also been more forceful, stressing to the public that the Taliban, “...have no plan for the development of Afghanistan; they are here to kill you; they are against women; they are against education; they are against progress for the nation of Afghanistan.” As these messages resonate, the government must show that it is the only viable option for Afghanistan. At the city, district, provincial, and national levels, the people of Afghanistan see that the return of the Taliban represents a return to brutality, criminality, and oppression.
- The operating environment is also evolving for the Taliban due to the emergence of other insurgent and terrorist groups. One such group is Daesh in Afghanistan, or Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP). Daesh continues to conduct brutal attacks against civilians, and directly competes with the Taliban for resources to establish a foothold in the country. They have focused their

efforts on establishing a presence in Nangarhar and recruiting in other areas. We recently gained the authority to strike Daesh. Since then, we have had considerable success in degrading their capabilities. The rejection of Daesh by local elders, who are working with Afghan security forces, has also slowed the enemy's progress. The strikes have been effective in mitigating their growth. We must maintain constant pressure on Daesh and dedicate intelligence resources to prevent strategic surprise.

- The Taliban has had to adjust this year's strategy in order to counter the emergence of Daesh and other insurgent groups. This dynamic has served as a distraction to the Taliban, resulting in a shift of precious resources from fighting the ANDSF to countering opposition groups. More than just consuming resources, the in-fighting, and resultant inability to maintain cohesion has also severely damaged the credibility of the Taliban's core narrative of being a strong, united organization.
- Groups aligned with the Taliban such as al-Qa'eda and the Haqqani Network continue to threaten our national security interests. Al-Qa'eda has been significantly weakened, but as evidenced by the recent discovery of an al-Qa'eda camp on Afghanistan's southern border, they are certainly not extinct. The Haqqani Network remains the most capable threat to US and Coalition forces, planning and executing the most violent high profile attacks in Kabul.

UNCLASSIFIED

- These are certainly not “residual threats” that would allow for peaceful transition across Afghanistan. Instead, they are persistent threats that are adapting to a changing operational environment. Ultimately, the threats Afghanistan faces require our sustained attention and forward presence.
- Reconciliation is the path needed to obtain a negotiated settlement and end the conflict in Afghanistan. Current reconciliation efforts are an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned initiative, recently renewed with a quadrilateral meeting in mid-January that included Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and China.
- It has been over a year since the formation of the National Unity Government. It has faced institutional and political difficulties, yet can lay claim to some meaningful reform and progress during its first year. The unity government may be fragile, but it is holding despite being challenged, it is making continued progress, and building momentum to create an increasingly viable future. Politically, Afghanistan is postured for progress as well as a continuing strategic partnership with the United States. We have strong and willing partners in President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah—this has not always been the case.
- So, as I said at the beginning of this statement, we now ask ourselves, “what else can we do to enable the Afghan Security Forces?” And, “What else can the Afghans do for themselves to secure their country?” A strategic stalemate

UNCLASSIFIED

without end is not the goal of this campaign. Nor is it true to the reason we came here over 14 years ago. In fact, the recently submitted NATO Strategic Assessment makes recommendations for adjustments to the current NATO OPLAN that, in my best military advice, will help push the campaign past this inflection point and increase the prospect of achieving our shared goals.

- The measures that NATO is considering include advisory adjustments to give commanders more flexibility on the ground, and shifting from a yearly outlook to a 5-year vision to give all donor nations, and especially Afghanistan, the confidence that comes with predictability of support.
- The United States must continue to show flexibility with our mission in 2016 and beyond. As the commander, I am responsible for aligning our national objectives with ways and means while managing risk. Now that we have been allocated our resources for 2016, I am assessing the ways in which we ensure that 2016 is not a rerun of 2015. Based on conditions and the performance of the Afghan security forces during this winter lull, I am also reviewing how well those forces will likely perform in 2017 and the U.S. and coalition resources required for their continued development. This is all part of a broader process of which my assessment is only one part. I will provide my assessments of our strategy to my military leadership as well as my successor.

UNCLASSIFIED

- I think it is important to remember that this time last year, our plan was to transition to a 1,000 troop, Kabul-centric footprint. Due to conditions on the ground, the President made the decision to extend 9,800 through most of 2016, and increased our posture to 5,500 in 2017. This decision provided flexibility to make adjustments and represents the kind of conditions based approach that is so important for our mission in Afghanistan.
- Key to this long-term success in the region is the resiliency of the Afghan government and its security institutions, and the ability to serve as a regional partner in our combined efforts to counter violent extremism. It's important to remember that the National Unity Government welcomes our assistance. They are a dependable and steadfast counterterrorism partner in South Asia. 2017 marks a significant change in our approach as we focus our efforts to capitalize on the gains of the past decade and build the capacity of the Afghan security institutions.
- We now have a window of opportunity to increase our likelihood of achieving strategic success. Of course, our support should not be open-ended-- I believe our approach is sound. This year we will apply greater conditionality to the Afghans in managing the resources we give them. We are also developing a five-year vision out to 2020 to help better define what we are trying to accomplish, and avoid a year-to-year mentality. I believe that by changing our,

UNCLASSIFIED

and the Afghans', mindset from a cyclic "fighting season to fighting season" view to a genuine, long-term outlook best reflects our commitment.

- We need to provide the Afghans the time and space for them to continue to build their resiliency. Through their spirit and fortitude, they have proven worthy of our continued support. The actions we take now, combined with their resolve to improve, will, over time, develop a sustainable force capable of securing the nation, and in turn helping us secure ours.
- Thank you once again for your steadfast support of our campaign. I look forward to your questions.