

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
MENA and Asia and the Pacific Joint Subcommittee Hearing entitled:
After the Withdrawal: The Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Part II)
Wednesday, October 29, 2013

“In May, I led a bipartisan Congressional delegation to Afghanistan and was honored to spend some time with our brave heroes in the armed forces who continue to sacrifice their own safety to protect our freedoms.

As the Administration’s deadline to finalize the Bilateral Security Agreement, also known as the BSA, with the Afghan government approaches, it's becoming clear that there are still obstacles to overcome. It’s vitally important that the BSA adequately addresses the safety and well being of our brave men and women who will remain in Afghanistan after 2014.

However, if a BSA is finalized that addresses all of our concerns, we must ensure that an adequate number of U.S. forces will stay in Afghanistan to help fight extremist elements and train and advise the Afghan National Security Forces.

Listening to the counsel and advice of our Generals on the ground regarding troop numbers is crucial to maintaining the gains we have made over the last decade. We cannot let politics get in the way of our national security and stability in this volatile region. We may not be leaving in place enough of a support team to fight the extremist elements who will quickly move to take power away from the Afghan people.

I remain highly skeptical of the Afghan security forces’ ability, political will, and commitment to fight jihadists on their own. Last week an Afghan Special Forces Commander defected to an insurgent group allied with the Taliban, taking with him most of his unit’s guns, ammo, high tech equipment, packed in a Humvee.

We cannot risk allowing the Taliban to retake control of Afghanistan, reversing the significant progress made by our heroes in uniform. This could also lead to al-Qaeda regrouping and

stepping up terrorist activities using its safe havens in Pakistan as a staging ground, posing a real danger to our national security interests and those of our allies in the region.

A major test of the stability of a post-2014 Afghanistan will be the upcoming elections in April 2014. In Afghanistan, I urged President Karzai to commit to the electoral process and ensure that a free, fair, and transparent election will result in a peaceful transition of power through a democratic process. The 2009 election was marred in controversy, as corruption and fraud were widespread and rampant. Another fraud-plagued election this spring could severely jeopardize Afghan security, and put our own forces at risk. With a new government, I hope we'll be able to tackle the endemic corruption that has plagued the Afghan government and hampered substantial progress.

One reason for the massive corruption problems in Afghanistan stems from narcotics. Our CODEL pressed the Afghan government to do more to counter narcotics operations and eradication efforts. During the last poppy season, it's disappointing that the Afghan government wasn't willing to provide security for the eradication teams. Combating the nexus between terrorism financing and narcotics trafficking is vital to stabilizing the security situation in Afghanistan so that terrorist organizations cannot finance their illicit operations.

And look at Pakistan's role on the security situation in Afghanistan. For Afghanistan to achieve security and stability, Pakistan is going to have to play a stronger and more positive role. Extremist groups like the Taliban, al-Qaeda and Haqqani Network have used areas in the Pakistan border as insurgent sanctuaries to conduct militant operations inside Afghanistan without much resistance from the Pakistan intelligence and military forces, if not outright collaboration.

Because Pakistan is vital in establishing stability in the region, we must work with the government. But we mustn't continue to give billions of dollars in aid to Pakistan and hope, pray, and wish that the Prime Minister will work with us.

We must ensure that Pakistan is meeting certain benchmarks in its fight against these insurgent sanctuaries within its borders, or else Pakistan should not receive further U.S. funding.