

**Testimony of Ambassador James Dobbins
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Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss U.S. policy in Afghanistan and the region along with my colleague Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense Magsamen.

Allow me to begin by thanking the members of the Committee for your continued support for our mission. I know that you also share my appreciation for the generosity and steadfast resolve of the American people in support of Afghanistan. I would particularly like to recognize the dedication and bravery of thousands of American men and women who have served in our armed forces, our diplomatic outposts, and our assistance programs in that country.

This mission began in 2001 to ensure that Afghanistan could never again be used by those who would plot against the United States or our allies. Since then, in concert with partners from more than 50 nations, we have advanced this goal. Working hand-in-hand with dedicated Afghans, we also transformed the lives of millions. All of us – Americans, Afghans, NATO Allies, ISAF partners, and the many other countries that have joined this unprecedented international effort – share a vision of a sovereign, unified, democratic, and stable Afghanistan, a vision which is closer to realization today than at any time in that country’s history.

For several years now, our efforts have increasingly focused on consolidating the gains made over the past 13 years, and on empowering Afghans and Afghan institutions to deliver security, the rule of law, and vital services, including health, education, and economic opportunity, that all Afghans deserve. That is why we launched a process of transition in 2010, by which the Afghan National Security Forces have increasingly taken the lead role in protecting the Afghan people from insurgents who would turn back the clock on the extraordinary changes in Afghanistan. When Afghan and NATO leaders announced in Lisbon in 2010 that, by the end of 2014, Afghans would have full responsibility for their own security, many said the timeline was unrealistic – that the ANSF was simply not up to the challenge. A year ago last June, however, we marked the “milestone” of transition to Afghan lead on all combat operations throughout the country. Since then, Afghan forces have won the trust of the

Afghan citizens in their ability to protect them, a trust that was manifest in the high voter turnout during both rounds of the recent elections.

Last month, President Obama announced that, contingent on the conclusion of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), the United States is prepared to keep 9,800 troops beyond the end of this year to participate in a NATO train, advise, and assist mission, and to continue a limited counterterrorism mission. By the end of 2015, US forces will shift to a Kabul-Bagram disposition. By 2017, the U.S. security mission in Afghanistan will transform to an embassy-based security assistance model with a significant military and defense component. The President also made clear that 2017 will not mark the end of our commitment to Afghanistan. Afghans will need the assistance and partnership of the international community for years to come to strengthen their institutions, economy and government. With continued support from Congress and the American people, the commitments in the Strategic Partnership Agreement, at the NATO Summit in Chicago, and at the Tokyo Conference will help ensure that Afghanistan continues on a path of self-reliance and democratic development.

The timetable President Obama has laid out for Afghan self-sufficiency is a demanding one, but no more demanding than the transition already accomplished. Since 2011, NATO forces in Afghanistan have dropped from over 140,000 to 51,000 today, without occasioning any substantial loss of ground or population to the Taliban.

Institutional capacity has also grown beyond the security sector, as evidenced by the recent Presidential and local elections, the first to be administered almost entirely by the Afghans, the first to have met its own internal deadlines, and the best organized to date.

In April, roughly seven million Afghans voted in the first round of the presidential election – significantly higher than the turnout of the 2009 vote. Last Saturday, the run-off pitted two strong candidates against each other. On both occasions, Afghan forces provided the security, Afghan electoral bodies planned and administered the voting, Afghan media provided platforms for reasoned discussion about policy, Afghan civil society organizations and candidate agents monitored the polling centers, and Afghan political elites formed multi-ethnic tickets and campaigned all across the country.

Equally notable was the quality of the campaign, which was spirited and widespread, while generally moderate in tone and national in character. The

candidates crisscrossed the country, participated in large rallies, while generally eschewing negative campaigning and narrow ethnically based appeals.

The first round of Afghan presidential elections in April and Saturday's runoff put the ANSF to the test. On both occasions the Taliban organized hundreds of attacks, but Afghans still lined up to vote. Last Saturday, NATO forces did not fire a single shot, leaving election day security entirely in Afghan hands. Considering how much the Taliban had focused on disrupting the Afghan elections, the ANSF's efforts to secure the election bode well for the ANSF's performance in the long run.

It will be some time before we know the outcome of the vote. It is therefore critical that everyone – the candidates and their supporters, as well as the media and the voters – remain patient, not pre-judge the outcome and allow the Afghan electoral institutions time to do their jobs effectively and in accordance with Afghan law. As happened in the first round of voting, Afghans who have specific concerns and complaints have the opportunity to bring them to the Independent Election Commission and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission. Those bodies understand that their transparency and impartiality will be critical in ensuring that the Afghan people broadly accept President Karzai's successor as legitimate and credible. Premature or undocumented allegations of fraud are as dangerous as fraud itself.

The Afghan government has tentatively scheduled the inauguration of the next president for August 2, and we look forward to working with whoever that will be. At the same time, we also recognize the need for national unity, and call on both candidates to work together after the election in the spirit of patriotism that has marked the campaign so far.

The next Afghan president faces many challenges and uncertainties. What is certain is the commitment of the United States to our partnership with Afghanistan. An important aspect of this is our commitment, which President Obama reiterated on May 28, to conclude the BSA with the next Afghan administration as quickly as possible. With both presidential frontrunners having stated publicly that they would sign the BSA promptly upon taking office, the way forward on this now appears clear.

Let me also recognize the vast improvements in human rights that have been made since 2001 – none more striking than the gains made by women. There are serious concerns that as our presence draws down, these rights will somehow be

sacrificed. I am encouraged that both candidates made strengthening the rule of law, the protection of human rights and improving governance central tenets of their campaign platforms. Independent institutions like the judiciary and the human rights commission have a critical role to play in ensuring that there is no backsliding on the gains that have been made, and it is important that the next president nominate and appoint strong, qualified and reform-minded individuals to lead these bodies. The United States remains committed to supporting and bolstering the transparency of these institutions so that all Afghans have confidence that their rights will be protected. Crucial as well to promoting accountability and respect for human rights is an independent, vibrant civil society – which has blossomed remarkably in Afghanistan over the past decade, and must retain the operating space to do its vital work.

And in terms of governance, we all must remember that Parliamentary elections are less than a year away. Parliament has made important strides in adopting new laws, in vetting presidential nominations and in serving as an oversight body to improve government accountability. Parliamentarians will need to continue performing these important functions, even as the campaign season for the legislative elections approaches. And the next president and the security institutions will need to work closely with the electoral bodies to ensure those elections are timely and successful.

Given the progress that has been made in the political transition thus far, we are also beginning to think about how best to help the new Afghan president to address the myriad challenges he will face. The new president will need to strengthen Afghan executive, legislative, and judicial institutions; address corruption, which is corrosive to the legitimacy of the Afghan state; pursue economic reforms that will enable private sector led growth and stabilize the fiscal environment; determine a path for launching a reconciliation process; and set a constructive course for improving relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors. In my experience, governments all around the world often have problems doing more than one or two things at a time – which makes the scope of the agenda faced by the Afghan state all the more daunting.

We have a stake in supporting the new government as it confronts these challenges and strives to not just maintain, but build on the progress that has been made over the last 12 years. The President's announcement of our post-2014 presence is a step toward defining this long-term commitment. To support this agenda and ensure it is effective, we will need continuing support from Congress.

Afghanistan will require significant U.S. and international attention for years to come – including continuing robust levels of development and security assistance.

In 2012, we joined with the rest of the international community in Tokyo to outline a program of sustained international support combined with an Afghan-led program of reform and institutional development. This “mutual accountability” acknowledged that foreign assistance would necessarily decline – but that we would seek to graduate that decline so as to protect the gains achieved with our support and investments. When Congress cut the Fiscal Year 2014 appropriation for Afghanistan by 50%, it noted the difficult bilateral relationship, and particularly the failure of the Afghan Government to sign the BSA, as well as the existing funding pipeline.

We believe the President’s Fiscal Year 2015 foreign assistance request for Afghanistan, although it represents an increase from the previous appropriation, re-establishes a responsible, downward trajectory for our assistance and reflects what we expect to be a productive working relationship with the new Afghan Government and the reality of a much diminished pipeline. As we reduce our assistance over time, it is critical that we defend the gains made over the past year, including by Afghan women and girls, and give the Afghan Government the time and space necessary to build sustainable sources of revenue.

Later this year, the United Kingdom has agreed to organize a conference to review progress since Tokyo, and to enable the new Afghan Government to present its plan for inclusive economic growth and increasing sustainability. As I mentioned earlier, the challenges, most notably corruption, are significant, but they are issues that the current Presidential candidates stressed during the campaign.

Both candidates have also talked about the need for a process of political reconciliation to bring an end to the bloodshed and violence that has wracked Afghanistan for three decades and ensure its long-term stability. The specifics of such an effort will be for the new Afghan president to decide, but United States will continue to support steps that improve the climate for an Afghan-led reconciliation process. Our objective has been and continues to be to promote and support a political process by which Afghans sit down with other Afghans to determine the future of their country. Both Presidential candidates have promised to pursue efforts at peace and reconciliation. This past weekend again demonstrated the desire of the Afghan people for peace, their determination to decide their future for themselves, and their commitment to do so through free elections. That underscores the conviction we share with the Afghan people that,

as part of the outcome of any reconciliation process, the Taliban and other insurgent groups must break ties with al-Qa'ida, end violence, and accept Afghanistan's constitution, including its protections for women and minorities.

One of the potentially positive factors weighing in favor of stability in Afghanistan is the increasing convergence of regional interests. States across the region are recognizing that their stability is linked to Afghanistan's stability and prosperity. Late last year, after President Karzai chose to delay signing the BSA, President Xi, President Putin, Prime Minister Singh, and Prime Minister Sharif each engaged with him to urge that he conclude the agreement. It is extraordinary that the Russians, Chinese, Indians and Pakistanis would all support the continuation of a U.S. and NATO military mission in Afghanistan for at least several more years.

Clearly, as this unusual conjunction of regional views indicates, the US and NATO drawdown is a source of anxiety for regional powers. Pakistan, Uzbekistan and China all fear Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for their own hostile militant groups. India fears Afghanistan again becoming a training ground for terrorist groups targeting them. Russia remains concerned about the flow of narcotics. Iran and Pakistan fear new floods of refugees. For the present these varying concerns have led to a convergence of policy, in favor, Iran excepted, of a continued US and NATO presence, and in support of the existing constitutional regime in Kabul. The United States consults with all of these countries in various multilateral forums, and, again with the exception of Iran, also does so on a frequent bilateral basis.

Despite our differences over events in the Ukraine we continue to value our dialogue with Moscow over Afghanistan. China will soon host a large regional meeting focused on addressing a number of common challenges. Prime Minister Modi of India invited both President Karzai and Prime Minister Sharif to join other regional leaders at Modi's inaugural, demonstrating his interest in regional cooperation.

Of all these powers, Pakistan probably has the greatest potential for influence over Afghanistan's future evolution, for better or worse. The growth of an indigenous militant threat to Pakistan's own constitutional order, in the form of the Pakistani Taliban or TTP, and the many links between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, along with the several other militant and terrorist groups active there, have made this an increasingly costly and ultimately unsustainable strategy. After an extended effort to negotiate with the TTP, Prime Minister Sharif has ordered a major military offensive designed, we are told, to clear all militants,

foreign and domestic, out of their major stronghold in North Waziristan. In the short term this offensive will present challenges to Afghanistan, as innocent civilian refugees, along with Afghan, Pakistani and other foreign militants flee across the border. In the longer term, however, if the Pakistani authorities deliver on their promise to deny the use of their territory to militant groups, this effort will significantly enhance security in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In 2001 parts of Kabul looked like Berlin at the end of the Second World War. In December of that year, when I reopened the American Embassy as the first post 9/11 U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan, Kabul was a ruined city, ravaged by decades of invasion, civil war, and Taliban autocracy; the capital of a country that had no police force, no military, no ministries, no judicial system, few schools. Societies take a long time to recover from historical trauma of this magnitude, but only thirteen years later, Afghanistan has millions of children in school, an increasingly effective defense and police force, a professional independent media, and a functioning political system. These institutions, working together, were able to carry out two nationwide elections in the space of two months, despite bad weather, an active insurgency, and a short tradition of democratic practice. The Afghans have repeatedly demonstrated their desire for democracy and rule of law and to interact with other countries in the region and the world as a sovereign nation with its own traditions.

We have read for years about continued prevalence of violence, high levels of corruption, limited governmental capacity and misdirected foreign assistance. All of this is undoubtedly true. Yet despite these genuine deficiencies longevity in Afghanistan has risen by 20 years since 2001, the largest such leap in life expectancy that any society has ever achieved over such a short period. Twice as many Afghans can read and write today as could in 2001, and twice as many again will be able to do so ten years from now. Poverty and corruption have replaced insecurity as the prime voter concerns in much of the country. Yet despite these real and well-grounded concerns, polling continually reveals that most Afghans see their lives improving, have a positive assessment of their government, are confident in the capacity of their army and police and are optimistic about their future.

This optimism will be tested in the years ahead. As NATO forces continue to draw down economic growth will slow and the Afghan security forces will be repeatedly challenged. The Afghans, other regional governments, our NATO partners and the international donor community will all be looking to United States to continue to lead in supporting the continued consolidation and extension of the

dramatic changes that have already taken place in that country. Our ability to do so will depend upon the willingness of Congress to continue to respond positively to this and future Administrations' requests for security and economic assistance funding, even as the overall costs of our engagement in Afghanistan will continue to decline rapidly.