

**Testimony of Ambassador James F. Dobbins
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Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Corker, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the transition in Afghanistan.

As all of you know, the U.S. role in the latest chapter of Afghanistan's history began on September 11, 2001. Within a month, U.S. forces were in Afghanistan in pursuit of the al-Qaida terrorists who planned the attacks and the regime that had given them sanctuary. That military involvement has now lasted more than a decade and has expanded to a NATO-led international coalition of forty-nine nations. The military campaign has been accompanied by a truly extraordinary international civilian campaign to help heal the scars of decades of war and years of life under a system of government that made the cruel commonplace and to ensure that such a government can never again return, to provide shelter to those who would threaten American citizens, interests, or allies.

From the beginning, we have made clear that our role in Afghanistan and our presence there cannot be open ended. It has always been the aim of U.S. policy to strengthen Afghan institutions so that the Afghan government and people can provide for their own security, grow their own economy, and manage their own internal and external affairs. The President has spoken of these three transitions: security, economic, and political. The underlying element of all three has been a gradual and responsible effort to help Afghans recover from decades of conflict and Taliban rule that damaged or destroyed nearly every institution in the country.

A stable, democratic, and secure Afghanistan is a U.S. national interest; it will be a bulwark against al Qaida and other dangerous extremist groups and a partner in the effort to prevent those groups from using Afghanistan to plan and launch attacks against our people and our allies. And while Afghanistan still faces significant challenges, I can say with the perspective of having first led U.S. diplomatic efforts on Afghanistan 12 years ago, that we are closer than ever to achieving this goal. I'd like to spend a few minutes reviewing our efforts and the progress Afghanistan is making.

SECURITY TRANSITION AND PARTNERSHIP

The Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), signed by President Obama and President Karzai in May 2012, codified the terms of our partnership after 2014. It looked ahead to a Transformation Decade of cooperation, as the Afghans continued to strengthen their institutions, improve governance, and stabilize their economy. While making clear that the United States does not seek permanent bases in Afghanistan or a presence that is a threat to Afghanistan's neighbors, the SPA included a provision to negotiate a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between the two countries which would govern future security cooperation.

After a year of negotiations to conclude the text, that agreement was submitted two weeks ago to a Loya Jirga, a traditional gathering of 2500 Afghan leaders from all parts of the country. After three days of debate, the Loya Jirga overwhelmingly endorsed the BSA as written and urged President Karzai to sign it before the end of the year. This decision underscores the clear and strong desire of the Afghan people to continue their partnership with the United States and the international community and their determination to move forward, away from the Taliban past.

The United States agrees with the Afghan people. Signing the BSA promptly is the path to a partnership in support of Afghan efforts to achieve lasting peace, security, and development. It will send an important signal to the people of Afghanistan, to the Taliban, to our allies and partners, and to the region. For the Afghan people, it will reduce anxiety and uncertainty about the future, allowing them to concentrate on the upcoming elections and to invest with confidence in their own economy. A signed BSA will tell the Taliban, who may think that the end of 2014 means the end of international support for Afghanistan, that their only path to peace is by ending violence, breaking ties with al Qaida and accepting the Afghan constitution, including its protections for women and minorities. A signed BSA will assure the region that the United States will remain engaged there and not abandon Afghanistan as we did in 1989 after the Soviet withdrawal. To our NATO Allies and other international partners, a signed BSA will open the door for NATO to begin negotiations on the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Afghanistan that will cover its forces participating in the train, advise, and assist mission.

For all of these reasons, the Administration is committed to expeditious signature of the BSA. Delaying signature is in no one's interest. Delay would add another element of uncertainty as Afghans prepare for the April, 2014 election to choose President Karzai's successor. For the United States and our NATO Allies, delay

means a lack of clarity needed to plan for a post-2014 military presence. That, in turn, would jeopardize fulfillment of the pledges of assistance that NATO and other countries made at the Chicago and Tokyo conferences in 2012. As Ambassador Rice made clear in her recent visit to Kabul, although it is not our preference, without a prompt signature we will have no choice but to initiate planning for a post-2014 future in which there would be no U.S. or NATO troop presence in Afghanistan.

Let me make clear, however, that plans are not decisions, and assure you that we are not about to decide to abandon all we and the Afghan people have achieved over the past 12 years. Based on the results of the Loya Jirga, expressions of public opinion throughout the country and discussions throughout my own visit to Kabul last week, I don't believe that there can be any serious doubt that the Afghan people want American and NATO forces to stay and recognize that the BSA is a necessary prerequisite. The BSA is also the keystone of a much wider international commitment, involving over 70 countries ready to provide economic and security assistance to Afghanistan beyond 2015.

Afghanistan's regional neighbors, with the exception of Iran, also understand the importance of the BSA. President Putin of Russia, President Xi of China, Prime Minister Singh of India and Prime Minister Sharif of Pakistan have all personally urged President Karzai to conclude the BSA in recent weeks. Several of these leaders are no fans of an American military presence in Central Asia, but all recognize that without continued international military and economic support, Afghanistan risks falling back into civil war, with the attendant rise in extremist groups, outflow of refugees and disruptions in commerce that would threaten the region as a whole.

Given this coincidence of Afghan public and regional governmental opinion, I see little chance that the BSA will not be eventually concluded. Awaiting the arrival of the next Afghan President to do so, however, will impose large and unnecessary costs on the Afghan people. Already the anxiety caused by President Karzai's refusal to heed the advice of the Loya Jirga is having that effect. While in Kabul last week I learned from the World Bank and other sources that the Afghan currency is slipping in value, inflation increasing, capital fleeing and property values dropping. Probably for the first time since 2001 the outflow of population exceeds the return of refugees. The longer this uncertainty about the future international commitment to Afghanistan continues, the more anxiety will increase, potentially dominating the upcoming Presidential elections, threatening to turn these into a polarizing rather than unifying experience for the country.

Prolonged uncertainty over the BSA will also erode larger international support for Afghanistan. At Tokyo in July 2012 and at Chicago in May 2012, the international community pledged billions to the support of the Afghan security forces and the Afghan economy beyond 2014. As in the United States, the fulfillment of the pledges is dependent on public support and parliamentary approval. Prolonged delay in concluding the BSA, and the also required NATO equivalent agreement can only diminish the prospect that these pledges will be fully met.

As the President has said, the U.S. combat mission will end in Afghanistan at the end of 2014. The BSA does not prescribe the number of U.S. forces that may be present in Afghanistan after 2014, but it will give us the invitation to remain that President Obama will need as he makes that force level decision. By next February, there will be 34,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, down from roughly 100,000 at the height of the surge, and any post-2014 military presence will be much smaller. Those who remain will concentrate on two specific, narrow missions: counter-terrorism operations against the remnants of al Qaeda and its affiliates, and training, advising, and assisting Afghan security forces.

It is important to note that, while the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are still a work in progress, there is reason to be encouraged, thanks to capabilities that have been fostered and developed by the U.S. military and our allies. Our efforts are making a critical difference and can continue to do so. I should note that the Afghan people themselves share this assessment. According to a recent Asia Foundation survey, 88% of Afghans have confidence in the Afghan National Army and 72% in the Afghan National Police.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

I know that Assistant Administrator Sampler will talk about USAID's efforts to deliver and monitor civilian assistance in Afghanistan, how that assistance has improved the lives of ordinary Afghans, and the challenges his agency faces working in that country. I am happy to talk about the specifics of what we are doing, but I first want to offer some encouraging news about how we are doing overall. For the past nine years, the Asia Foundation has conducted a nationwide survey of Afghan attitudes and opinions, tracking long-term trends among the population. The latest annual Asia Foundation of more than 9,000 Afghans drawn from every province was released last week, and it confirmed, through the eyes of ordinary Afghans, the depth and durability of the progress Afghanistan has made, with our support.

A few numbers stand out. Today, 57% of all Afghans believe their country is moving in the right direction. This number has increased steadily since 2008, when it stood at 38%. Not surprisingly, the majority – 76% – said they were better off economically than they were under the Taliban. Three quarters gave their national government a positive assessment although they remained critical of subnational government and Parliament and concerned about corruption at all levels. Five in six Afghans – men and women – believe that women should have an education. 75% believe it is acceptable to criticize the government in public—a sign of an active democracy with an independent media, which is the civilian institution in which Afghans have the most confidence. Sympathy for armed opposition groups is far lower than in 2009 and yet, nevertheless, a majority of Afghans understand the need for peace and support Afghan-led reconciliation efforts. The overall picture is one of an aspiring nation that has witnessed and welcomed the progress that the international effort has helped bring about. These are the people whose representatives at the Loya Jirga overwhelmingly approved the BSA.

This growing optimism among Afghans is due in part to the increasing capability of some of their institutions, none of which existed in 2001. According to the poll, the Afghan media is one of the country's most trusted institution. The growth of a free media is one of the great achievements of reconstruction in Afghanistan. When the Taliban ruled, people had few modern means to communicate with one another (there were fewer than 40,000 phones in the country) or to get information (there was one state-run TV station). Now, more than 18 million Afghans have phones and the telecommunications network covers 90% of the population. Afghans are also eager for news, which they see on one of the 75 TV stations or hear on the 175 radio stations available. This is not, I should add, a triumph of quantity over quality. In the most recent worldwide assessment of press freedom by Reporters Without Borders, Afghanistan outranked Pakistan and India and every other country but one in its region. The Loya Jirga that considered the BSA was televised nationally and Afghans watched as their representatives debated their future. This would have been technically impossible and politically unimaginable 15 years ago.

There is a body of research that demonstrates the effectiveness of the international effort in Afghanistan. Of the 20 major post-Cold war interventions conducted by the United States, United Nations, and others, Afghanistan had the greatest improvements in the UN's Human Development Index, was third among twenty improvements in government effectiveness as measured by the World Bank,

government, and was second out of these twenty in growth of per capita income. Afghanistan's progress should be compared with that of other countries that have faced similar levels of conflict. Even postwar stabilization in European countries over these same decades, where conditions for stabilization have been much more favorable, has taken many years.

Afghan institutions are performing better, in part, because they are increasingly integrated within the regional economy of Central and South Asia. With considerable financial and technical assistance from the United States and American supported international agencies, millions of Afghans can now access electricity from power lines stretching across their northern border into Central Asia. In the last five years, trade between Afghanistan with its South and Central Asian neighbors has far outpaced trade with the outside world. Building strong state, civil society, and private sector institutions by economically integrating Afghanistan within its neighborhood remains at the heart of our New Silk Road vision.

POLITICAL TRANSITION

Despite all of the focus on the BSA in recent days, the political transition is next year's critical event. A timely presidential election in April can be a unifying moment for the country, consolidating the gains of the past decade and demonstrating that the Afghan people would rather use politics than violence to solve their differences. If successful, this will be the first peaceful transfer of power from one elected leader to another in Afghanistan's history.

The Afghans have committed to holding credible, inclusive, and transparent elections, and they are on track to meet this commitment. Larry Sampler will talk about what we are doing to support this effort, so let me talk about what the Afghans have done and are doing. As with elections anywhere, many things can go wrong between now and election day in April, but Afghanistan is far ahead, in terms of technical preparations, of where it was in previous electoral cycles. Afghanistan's last elections were conducted under rules established by presidential decree because the political system had been unable to reach consensus on necessary legislation. Compare that to today. This past summer, Afghan legislators passed the laws establishing the structures that will shape the vote and procedures to evaluate complaints. In July, President Karzai signed that legislation into law. Now, the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) is implementing those laws, working with the Ministry of Interior on the security plans that will be critical to the success of the election. The IEC is also engaged in a nationwide

voter registration “top up” program, which, thus far, has enrolled 3.1 million new voters of which 1 million are women. Although women’s participation in the process still needs to improve, 3 of the prospective Vice Presidents are women, as are over 300 (11%) of the provincial council candidates. Presidential candidates have registered and last month the IEC approved a final official list of 11 candidates. Official campaigning gets underway in February, when rallies, ads, and televised debates will take place.

We have made clear that, in the upcoming election, the United States will support the process, not any individual party or candidate. We will continue to assist Afghan electoral authorities, the Afghan government, parliament and civil society in their efforts to strengthen the electoral system and to minimize electoral fraud. While the Afghan government has taken encouraging steps to ensure security for poll workers, the Independent Election Commission and other elections-related workers, we will continue to monitor security trends as the elections near. Our military experts are also helping the Afghans with security planning. That said, ISAF planners have been surprised by the extremely limited number of requests from the Afghan security forces as they support IEC voter registration efforts in insecure areas of the country – what is, in effect, a dry run for the challenges they will need to handle during next April’s vote.

Enduring stability will require reconciliation and we remain committed to supporting an Afghan peace 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. The outcomes of peace and reconciliation must be the Taliban and other insurgent groups breaking ties with al Qaeda, ending violence, and accepting Afghanistan’s constitution, including its protections for women and minorities. Even as we remain committed to supporting a peace process, we do not plan to let up our fight against international terrorism in Afghanistan or our support to Afghan forces. Our military and diplomatic efforts continue to be mutually reinforcing.

I do not mean to present an overly rosy picture of Afghanistan’s present or future. Many challenges remain. The Taliban continue to fight. Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world and the drawdown of international military forces will reduce economic growth. Afghans still need to put in place the physical infrastructure and legal framework to encourage long-term sustainable development and attract private investment. Corruption is a major problem – one the Afghan public is aware of and one the Afghan government promised to reduce as part of the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework. The narcotics trade is far

from under control, as the recent announcement of a record poppy harvest showed. All of these require sustained commitment from the Afghans and the further development of their institutions to remedy. But most Afghans want to fix them, as the survey shows, and international support is vital to helping them do so.

As we focus on the pivotal year 2014, which will mark the end of the U.S. combat mission and what we hope and expect will be the successful transfer of power to a new, democratically elected Afghan president, we should also keep an eye on the future of this region. Afghanistan has a young population; more than 65% of Afghans are under 25 and the average age is 18. Over the last decade many of these young Afghans have gone to school, learned to use e-mail, set up Facebook pages, become connected to other Afghans outside their provinces and ethnic groups, reclaimed their artistic heritage, become familiar with other countries and ways of life, even learned English. (There are 1.5 – 2 million Internet users.) They participate in civil society and establish think tanks. They are moving from the rural areas to the cities for jobs and education. Sustaining our relationship with Afghanistan means maintaining our connection with those young Afghans. Their future is crucial to the stability of the region and ultimately the security of the United States. Right now these young men and women want democracy, access to free media, economic opportunities, transparency and education. A partnership with the United States will help them consolidate the institutions that did not exist 12 years ago, but which have grown in their lifetimes and which will help ensure that these youth rebuff the recruitment of extremists and help to build a peaceful democratic partner for the United States and our allies.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that despite the many challenges, we have much to build on as we look to the future of America's partnership with Afghanistan. Thanks in large part to the generosity of the American people, the courage of its men and women in uniform and the bipartisan support of Congress, Afghanistan is a fundamentally different country than it was 12 years ago. It remains a hopeful country, although uncertainty over conclusion of the BSA is unnecessarily increasing anxiety at just the point in Afghanistan's growing self-reliance where reassurance is most necessary. This administration looks forward to continuing its work with Congress to help ensure that as these hopes are realized our own vital national security interests are secured.