

**Congressional Hearing on “the Administration’s Strategy in Afghanistan”**

**United States Senate**

**Committee of Foreign Relations**

**Wednesday December 16, 2015**

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Honorable Chairman Croker,

Honorable members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to offer my evaluation of the administration strategy on Afghanistan. The assessment I offer today is based entirely on my own views and analysis.

Mr. Chairman:

On January 1, 2015, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) took over full security responsibility in Afghanistan after the United States officially concluded Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) transitioned to Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS), contributing to both the NATO’s Resolute Support mission and continuing U.S. counterterrorism efforts against the remnants of al Qaeda.

In spite of specific capability gaps the ANDSF independently faced the upsurge of insurgency in 2015 and to a large extent held its own albeit with a higher casualty rates. Given the complex political and security context of the situation in and around Afghanistan, including the rise of new threats of violent extremism in the region, including the emerging affiliates of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, known as DAISH, ISIL and ISIS, the ANDSF is expected to face continued security threats and violence at least in the immediate future.

The ultimate goal, thus, should be building and sustaining sufficient indigenous defense and security capacity in Afghanistan to deal with emerging threats in the region. This involves not only generating and maintaining sufficient forces but also ensuring their financial sustainability, their operational effectiveness and agility to operate in a non-conventional environment and to deal with complex adaptive enemies in mostly nonlinear modes of combat.

It is in this regional security context that the United States strategy in Afghanistan needs to be defined and its effectiveness evaluated.

**U.S. Residual Military Presence in Afghanistan**

President Obama’s recent decision to maintain U.S. forces in Afghanistan at current levels for at least another year and to reduce only to a baseline of 5,500 as it relates to sustaining stability and maintaining progress toward peaceful and responsible government, was welcomed by the Afghan government and the Afghan populations as it ascertained U.S. continued support to the country at a time that it is not yet able to respond to the security threats in the region solely by its own resources.

Whether the presence of a baseline 5,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan can make a major difference is hard to determine since there are other domestic and regional factors that affect the situation. However, the absence of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan will definitely make and

adverse impact on regional stability. The presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan sends a strong message to friends and foes that Afghanistan is not going to be abandoned.

Having said this, the impact of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan depends less on their numbers and more on their assigned mission and the rules of engagement.

The Current NATO's Resolute Support Mission focuses on Training, Advising and Assisting (TAA) of Afghan forces at corps and Ministerial level through four regional "Train, Advise and Assist" commands (TAACs) located in the north, south, east and west with a central hub in Kabul. The TAACs are led by different nations. The United States leads TAAC-South in Kandahar and TAAC-East in Jalalabad; Germany leads TAAC-North in Mazar-e-Sharif; Italy leads TAAC-West in Herat; and Turkey leads TAAC-Capital in the Kabul area. The U.S. and coalition also continue to provide tactical advising to the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) and the Afghan Air Force (AAF). The low ratio of force-to-regions and uneven capacities of different regional commands is causing capacity shortfalls to help ANDSF narrow their key capability gaps particularly in aviation, intelligence, Special Forces, and logistics.

Further, there are uncertainties in the rules of engagement. The NATO partners see their combat role ended last year even as they support the Afghan combat troops who often get engaged in fighting. Meanwhile, based on their new rule of engagement the US forces take action against non-al Qaeda groups (including the Taliban) only when they pose a direct threat to U.S. and coalition forces or provide direct support to al-Qaeda. However, as part of the continued tactical-level TAA mission with ASSF and AAF, U.S. and coalition forces may accompany Afghan counterparts on missions in an advisory role during which U.S. forces may provide combat enabler support such as close air support. Similarly, the U.S. forces are also permitted to provide combat enabler support to Afghan-only missions under limited circumstances to prevent detrimental strategic effects to the campaign. The recent Taliban attacks in Kunduz and Helmand provinces showed that without the direct air support by the U.S. forces the Taliban would have overrun and controlled several key areas. This requires a review of the rules of engagement until ANDSF narrow their capability gaps, an effort that may take at least five years given the current level of international assistance.

### **The U.S.-Afghanistan Partnership to build ANDSF**

The Commitment of the Afghan Unity Government to long-term partnership with the United States for security cooperation provides a great opportunity for the development of effective ANDSF. With the strong operational and financial assistance of the United States, in the past 14 years, the ANDSF have come a long way transforming from an odd assortment of factional militias into modern security institutions with professional capacity and political loyalty to a unified state. It was a long journey over a bumpy road entailing significant achievements and often avoidable failures with lasting impacts that shape the current status of the country's security institutions - A force of immense capability to face ongoing security challenges while still constrained by capability gaps in certain key areas.

To fill these gaps the ANDSF have long been dependent of U.S. support in its operations. The fast-paced numerical force generation of ANDS during the transition period left little time to develop certain capabilities including the air force, intelligence and logistics that takes longer time and elaborate infrastructures.

Further, the development of the ANDSF cannot happen in a vacuum but depends on the development and progress in other areas of institution building including the rule of law. There is a strong need to take effective measures to fight corruption, nepotism and political factionalization of the ANDSF.

Interference of politicians, top government officials and power-brokers in appointment of men and women of their personal choice to higher position not only undermine professional effectiveness of the army and police, as they face a brutal war, but also undermine morale and motivation to fight for the regime. The situation also encourages corruptions where incompetent officers and commanders can gain their posts through bribery or political influence. The most damaging issue that undermines legitimacy is the rush of political elite to extend their patronage network through posting their adherents in key security positions at the expense of winning the war. With the rise of insurgency some powerbrokers have managed to remobilize and arm their militias under the guise of local anti-Taliban militia or the Afghan Local Police (ALP) who in certain area have been involved in abusing of the population undermining the legitimacy of the state.

The key to the sustainability of the ANDSF as an effective force is to empower the Afghan indigenous capacity through narrowing the gaps and upgrading its capability particularly in five key functional areas: Leadership, combined arm integration, command and control, training and sustainment. This may take longer than the assumed life of the RSM that ends in 2017. The follow-on level of assistance to ANDSF – the Enhanced Enduring Partnership (EEP or else) - may be required at least for five more years and a NATO-Afghanistan counter-terrorism partnership for ten years. The nature of NATO involvement beyond the RS mission is expected to be defined in the next NATO Summit in Warsaw planned to meet in July 2016. Further, The U.S.-Afghanistan Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) commits the United States “to assist ANDSF in developing capabilities required to provide security for all Afghans,” which includes “upgrading ANDSF transportation and logistics systems; developing intelligence sharing capabilities; strengthening Afghanistan’s Air Force capabilities; conducting combined military exercises; and other activities as may be agreed.”

### **The Prospect for Sustained Political, Economic and Security Cooperation**

The key factor in improving prospects for sustained political, economic and security cooperation with the National Unity Government is to implement the promised structural, electoral and functional reform within the Afghan state. The key challenge is how to reconcile the competing demands of maintaining unity and governing effectively in the face of shared authority of the two leaders in appointment to key positions in the government and the diverse political programs of the two main components of the Unity Government and how to avoid frictions in a duumvirate system without solid constitutional basis.

These problems notwithstanding, the legitimacy of the Afghan government is helped by strong international backing particularly the U.S. support of the AUG and the compromises by the political elite to maintain unity albeit at the expense of effectiveness. The absence of a viable alternative is another element of public acceptance of the AUG. An overwhelming majority of Afghans continue to see the armed opposition an undesirable choice. But this situation can change either as a result of fading international support or continued ineffectiveness of the AUG particularly its failure to improve security, fight corruption, ensure economic recovery, address growing unemployment and attend to rising demographic issues.

Short term economic measures to provide some stimulus. The weak economy is one of the Unity Government's great vulnerabilities, and simply demonstrating that a plan exists and that there is a will to implement would help halt the hemorrhage of confidence.

Practically, the only real option is for the unity government to understand that it is facing a crisis and begin acting as if it were. At a minimum, that Ghani and Abdullah have to make mutual compromises to decide on the appointment of positions and the formulation of policy. It will also require a serious strategic review of last year's security operations and a concerted plan that takes advantage of President Obama's extension of the U.S. military presence to reverse the battlefield momentum that now favors the Taliban. The fall of Kunduz can be directly linked to the rivalry within the national government and its failure to project a sense of strategic direction. The division within the Afghan government extends to the lowest units of administration. The good news is that Kunduz, while lost by informal militias and dysfunctional government, was regained by national forces acting in the name of the state.

### **The Role of regional Actors**

Although all regional actors agree that stability in Afghanistan contributes to peace and security in the region, they see the stability from different perspectives. Among the regional countries Pakistan can play a more influential role in facilitating peace in Afghanistan through peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Pakistan has control and influence over the Taliban as their bases are in Pakistan and they have access to means which support the logistics of their war in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has also suffered from terrorism and extremists' insurgency and has been forced to launch major counterinsurgency operation in its tribal areas. Both the Pakistani government and its army leadership has indicated willingness to cooperate with Afghanistan, U.S. and other regional countries in support of a political settlement in Afghanistan. However, while such promises are encouraging, the real change will come only when promises are supported by deeds.

In general, prospects for a political settlement in Afghanistan are influenced by three main factors: Viability and effectiveness of the Afghan government; the capacity of ANDSF to degrade the Taliban power; and cooperation from Pakistan through improved Afghan-Pakistan relations. The first two factors deny the Taliban a hope to overthrow the Afghan government and change their hedging mood while the third factor facilitate and speeds up reconciliation.

Improvement of cooperative ties between Kabul and Islamabad is crucial to creating favorable environment for political settlement of the Afghan conflict. The Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has taken steps toward improving relationships with Pakistan in the interest of joint efforts to deal with the security challenges in Afghanistan and the region. After some initial improvement including Islamabad's assistance to host the first direct talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban representative in Murree, Pakistan, on July 7, the relationship suffered a major setback. The hindrance was caused by rising mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad following the announcement of the death of the Taliban leader Mullah Omer who had died more than two years back in Karachi leading to Kabul's suspicions of Pakistani cover up. Furtherer the upsurge of violence in Afghanistan by the new Pakistan-based leadership of the Taliban and failure of Pakistan to stop the public gathering and free movement of the Taliban on its soil in support of their attacks in Afghanistan added to the mistrust.

Rising concerns over continued instability and the emergence of the ISIS in Afghanistan and Pakistan, have created a new regional dynamism by major powers including China and the United States to help the peace process in Afghanistan. However, even if such process begins today, it will take several years before it leads to a peaceful settlement of the Afghan conflict.

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