

# **Senate Foreign Relations Committee Testimony - The Administration's Strategy in Afghanistan**

**by**

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Thank you Mr. Chairman, Senator Cardin, Members of the Committee, I am honored to testify today on U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. I appreciate this opportunity to address why continued U.S. engagement in Afghanistan is so important, and to place our efforts there in the context of the challenge we face from the extreme, distorted Islamic ideology which threatens our citizens, our values and our way of life.

Rather than submit a statement for the record, I would refer the Committee to the recent Atlantic Council paper on Afghanistan and U.S. Security, of which I was the principal author. Co-signed by 28 former senior U.S. government officials of both parties and prominent policy experts, and with Senators McCain and Reed as honorary co-sponsors, the paper registers bi-partisan agreement that Afghanistan matters to America's security, has a way forward to success despite all the challenges, merits the continued U.S. engagement required to protect American interests, and should be seen in the context of the broader terrorist threat. Inter alia, we argued to maintain U.S. and coalition military forces and intelligence assets at close-to-current levels and to leave options open for the next American president.

2014 and 2015 were years of great political, security, and economic transition and uncertainty for Afghanistan. With clarity about long term U.S. engagement, there is now the opportunity to turn that around. I

applaud President Obama's decision to maintain the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan through 2016 and beyond. This is a crucially important strategic indicator of U.S. commitment to Afghanistan's security and success. It provides clarity for Afghans, the Taliban and the region that there will be a significant U.S. military role in the future, with no deadline. I wish such clarity had been provided several years ago. It is critical to the confidence of Afghans that they can succeed, and to demonstrating to the Taliban that they cannot. Clarity that the Afghan project will not fail, that Afghanistan will not collapse under Taliban pressure and terror, will be crucial to the prospects for Afghan confidence, continued success and ultimately for peace. Preserving that clarity is in fact the priority strategic goal: it must be clear there is no space in Afghanistan for Al-Qaida and Daesh to flourish, nor a place for the Taliban absent a political settlement.

With today's increased levels of violence and the evolution of new threats, the administration should revisit whether the U.S. security strategy formulated several years ago is adequate to today's task of ensuring the success of the ANSF. They are doing the fighting, they will continue to improve. Any further reduction in international forces must be commensurate with ANSF capabilities, and critical gaps in close air support, intelligence and logistics must continue to close, and not widen. The development of Afghanistan's own air capabilities, including the sustainment of their own helicopters, must be a priority.

In this new context of clarity about the U.S. commitment to Afghan security, we should explore a genuine regional effort to strengthen Afghanistan and promote peace. There were hopeful signs at last week's meeting of the Heart of Asia process in Islamabad. President Ghani and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, with the encouragement of the U.S and China, discussed the prospects for resumption of Afghan discussions with the Taliban. Nawaz Sharif repeated that Afghanistan's enemies will be

treated as Pakistan's enemies, and both Afghanistan and Pakistan committed to prevent use of their territories by terrorists, and to dismantle sanctuaries. After the setbacks of last summer, President Ghani deserves credit for renewing the effort to open doors with Pakistan. The test will be whether Pakistan takes concrete actions not only to support reconciliation, but to reduce the ability of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network to plan and launch operations from Pakistan, which greatly diminishes the prospects for real negotiations.

The crucial tasks ahead for Afghanistan are exceedingly difficult – improving security, creating conditions for peace, building the economy, strengthening governance, forging Afghan political unity and commitment. For Afghanistan to succeed in building on the substantial progress already made, two mutually reinforcing processes must be continued:

First, it must be clear that adequate levels of international military, financial and political support are available so that the Afghans will have the time to build on progress made and to continue to take responsibility for their own affairs.

Second, the National Unity Government needs to perform and demonstrate achievement to the Afghan people and the international community. The government has advanced an ambitious reform agenda, and is struggling to implement it. The new Jobs for Peace Program is an effort, with security and economic implications, to provide work as the economy develops. The challenges are considerable. Afghanistan's political class must understand that the opportunity today afforded Afghanistan is unique, and must not be squandered if Afghanistan is to be seen as worthy of continued international diplomatic, development, and defense engagement.

The challenge to our security in Afghanistan is one part of the long term threat much of the world – not just the West -- faces from terrorism rooted in violent extremism, recently highlighted by attacks in Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Paris, California, Mali and elsewhere. The goal remains to prevent, and to help Afghans prevent, Afghanistan from becoming again a platform for those who threaten us. We have tended to dismiss the Daesh presence as “re-branded Taliban,” as if that made it less dangerous. We have seen in Libya that such indigenous affiliates eventually control ground and connect with the center in Syria. In Afghanistan we have a strategy that can work, with a willing Islamic partner, in the fight against terror. With the clarity of international commitment, Afghanistan can increasingly become a contributor to security.

We must not now lose sight of Afghanistan as we did before, after the expulsion, but not the defeat, of the Taliban. Our efforts there must be long term, and in concert with the need for the United States to help develop and implement a generational strategy to defend our people and values, while draining the life from the distorted version of Islam that animates Daesh, Al-Qaida and others. Experience teaches that ideology cannot be defeated militarily, although military force must be an instrument. The defeat of violent Islamic extremism can ultimately come only from within the Islamic world, which must play a leading role as part of a multilateral, multifaceted effort.

This is the context in which our future work in Afghanistan and the region must be seen. The success of Afghanistan is part of this larger struggle, which the civilized world – including more than 1.5 billion peace-loving Muslims – must win. The instruments we have used in the past, our strategies for dealing with state-to-state conflict, our leadership

patterns, the discourse with our publics, have not kept pace fully with the terrorist threats as they are evolving today and will exist tomorrow. In short, the United States and its partners have much serious work to do, and Afghanistan must be part of that effort.