United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Afghanistan: What is an Acceptable End-State and How do We Get There
Testimony of
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Chairman Kerry, Senator Lugar, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today. As you know I was US Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007. Additionally, I returned last year and again in March of this year for two weeks. I had the opportunity to visit many parts of the country and to talk to Afghan friends and foreign diplomats as well as the extensive briefings provided by ISAF and our Embassy. I am speaking only for myself, not for the American Academy of Diplomacy, the organization of which I am now President.

I would like to make a few, short comments on the current status and then turn to your questions. Much of the current debate turns on analysis of what the strategy has accomplished. That desire for instant scoring is very American, the American people and the Congress have a right to accountability but at the same time the demand for a bottom line can also be problematic because it sometimes invites very premature judgments. Getting the balance right is important.

Take security, for example. Judging not only from the views of my military colleagues but from what I heard from Afghan friends on the ground during my visit, there is definitely more security in parts of Helmand, Kandahar, and even in the north. But what does that mean for final analysis? Very little. The areas secured need to be turned over to Afghan forces and they, in turn, need to hold it with only a very light US backing. That has not yet been tried so therefore much so called analysis is speculation with inadequate evidence.

What can we judge? The current strategy is working slower than many hoped but not slower than is logical. Washington focuses on policy and tends to discount the time lags from decision, to execution. We thus leap to conclusions of failure about the time one could begin a serious analysis. The decision to enlarge forces and money, something I would have dearly loved in my time, is about two years old. Yet the actual troops only completed their arrival eight months ago and became effectively employed less than that. Ditto for civilian programs where people have to arrive, learn jobs, develop contacts with locals etc. Simply put, we have had a potentially effective strategy for a rather short time. It is certainly too early to claim success yet one can say that the trajectory of the policy is working, if not its desired pace.

Because of the time lag between decision and action we are now in a somewhat artificial and highly polarized debate about the numbers to be withdrawn. If significant numbers of troops are not withdrawn many will call the strategy a failure and if they are withdrawn too quickly we may guarantee failure.

The thing to watch is the next year. If US forces can transfer some of the difficult areas such as Helmand to the Afghans, and the Afghans can hold them, then transition will begin to have credibility. If nothing important or difficult has been transferred a year from now the strategy

will have to be questioned; perhaps to the point of giving up. These forthcoming operations should have much more focus than the debate over immediate withdrawal numbers.

The killing of Osama bin Laden is a significant victory for the United States but it is not the end of the war. Mistaking its significance could be costly. Insurgent secured territory in in Afghanistan could easily become a new sanctuary area for terrorist operations directed against the US. Al-Qaida as an organization continues to exist and will be under pressure to show that its strength through action in Afghanistan and against the United States. The Arab, Chechen, and Punjabi fighters we see emerging on Afghan battlefields will not disappear. The linkages between the Haqqani movement and Al Qaida have apparently become tighter in recent years and a more central part of the insurgency. That will not change. We turned our back on al-Qaida before. First, we did little to take it seriously after the bombing of our Embassies. The second time, by assuming we needed to put little effort into Afghanistan in the period 2002-2004, we let al-Qaida regrow exactly when they were weak and Afghanistan was more secure than it is now. To make the same mistake a third time, to count victory before it is in hand, would be exceptionally costly.

Turning directly to your questions, your letter of invitation first asked how recent policy choices have affected the current dynamic and potential for progress. Honestly, the answer points in two ways. On security, on building Afghan army forces I think the results are positive. Politically, however, we have and continue to cause confusion. The poor relations with President Karzai have grown over several years because of problems on both sides.

Afghanistan does suffer from a weak government with a high degree of corruption. President Karzai is poorly positioned to control these problems. He controls very little money since virtually the entirety of Afghanistan's development comes from foreign donors and many projects are executed without coordination with or consent by the Afghan government. Nor does President Karzai control force since military operations are directed by NATO/ISAF. Years of warfare have left few Afghans with any confidence that they can rely on pensions or continuing employment so there is a strong social pressure to grab what one can to protect oneself. These problems are large but not unique to Afghanistan.

However, the way we have gone about addressing them with President Karzai has made many problems worse rather than better. Two years of strident public criticism by US officials were taken by many Afghans as evidence that the US was against Karzai, perhaps even intending to overthrow him. This is because in Afghan culture one would never criticize a friend in public in this manner unless the friendship was over and the criticism was an excuse for moving against him. The idea that the criticism could actually be about what is stated is not credible to Afghans. When we continued this behavior it set off a search for the "real" reasons and inspired many wild conspiracy theories.

Additionally, the US also has employed equally corrupt warlords as contractors. This was done through ignorance, pressure for speed, and lack of knowledge of power and patronage networks in Afghanistan. Yet the result is to create further questions along the line of "why should I fire my crooks if you won't fire yours?" NATO and USAID are now seeking to clean up

their own contracting problems but are finding this hard and slow.

The decision to begin withdrawal of troops in July 2011 caused considerable additional confusion. While the decision had various caveats about conditions on the ground it was the date that was emphasized in President Obama's statements. This convinced many -not just Afghans but Pakistanis and even the Taliban -that America was on the way out of Afghanistan. Since virtually no one believed that the Afghan army would be ready to take over so quickly, this perception created a scramble for survival. The NATO decision to move the transition date to 2014 has helped the immediate problem but has not responded to the larger need for strategic clarity.

Currently, there is considerable confusion among Afghans about longer term US intentions. When I was in Afghanistan in March I heard essentially the same point from President Karzai, opponents like Dr. Abdullah, ex-ministers who oppose Karzai and even Afghans who are not in politics at all; each asking what our intentions are. This may be unfair but the fact is that they do not understand our long term strategic intent.

The result of all this is that President Karzai has developed strong suspicions that we are either against him or will leave before a state and army strong enough to survive have been built. Accordingly, he has intensified a survival strategy, that is, he is seeking to build a network of supporters who will sustain him politically and militarily if America bails out or moves against him. For survival he will tolerate poor performance in these supporters. From his point of view he has little choice if the US is about to pull the plug; and we have not told him otherwise. This may also account for some of his efforts to strengthen ties with other regional powers.

He also is seeking to define himself as something other than an American puppet (Afghan history shows that those marked as foreign puppets generally came to a bad end when their foreign patron departed). This produces public criticism. Sometimes it is excessive and unfair to us. Yet we seem not to pay attention to anything less than a scream. For example, the issue of control of the private security companies began in 2006 but we offered no plans or alternatives until the issue became a crisis in 2010. Clearly, many of the problems of poor governance are Afghan problems, some resulting from years of war and others from the character of individuals. However, I emphasize our own responsibility for the worsening of the issue because it is a part of the problem that is too little understood.

The result is a messy lack of trust and mutual bad feeling. The US is by far the bigger and stronger player. Hence, if the situation is to be improved it needs to start with greater strategic clarity from our side. Even if that is possible, patience and time will be needed. We have a home to which to return. If things end badly that will not be the case for Afghans like President Karzai. That imbalance is bound to make him cautious.

For Afghans more generally, the confusion results in the pursuit of hedging strategies. For example, everyone I talked to expects a major insurgent push this summer to regain the initiative. If we start pulling troops out there is the fear of Taliban victories in parts of the

country. Many non-Pushtun groups fear this could lead the present Afghan government to make a political deal with the Taliban, bringing them back to some measure of power in return for survival of the government.

This may not happen but such an outcome is greatly feared by many, particularly the non-Pushtuns. These minorities, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and others, were massacred and abused by the Taliban. They would fight rather than submit to a return of the Taliban that could threaten them. This could be the cause of a civil war. They might not wait to see if all their fears are realized. I do not think such a civil war is imminent but it is being talked of more than I have ever heard before. Groups and individuals are thinking about how to position themselves should it occur. This produces the "hedging" that, as much as corruption, gets in the way of unity in resisting the insurgency.

You asked what we need to achieve. Clearly we need to answer this question because it is the very lack of definition that is causing so much Afghan confusion and the hedging strategies I mentioned. Within Afghanistan we want to prevent the return of externally directed terrorism, to keep out the possibility of terrorism from Afghanistan. There is a confusing discussion about whether Al-Qaida post Osama bin Laden remains a threat in Afghanistan or whether this is essentially a Pakistani issue. Here I wish only to note my belief that if a movement that continues to consider itself at war with us is able to claim "defeat" of a superpower its potential for increasing recruits, funding and danger is enhanced. Although quantification is not possible, my judgment is that, such an Al-Qaida victory would significantly increase the potential for attacks on Americans in the world and in the United States.

We recognize that AQ is a movement that regenerates itself. Therefore since a single moment of victory is unlikely the first thing we need to achieve after clarity of purpose are Afghan security forces, essentially the army, capable of carrying on the level of fighting that is likely to remain after our departure. The Taliban are not "ten feet tall" so the standard I am referring to is not impossible but it does require dynamic leaders willing to fight for their country as well as their having essential support and logistics capabilities that are only now being developed. That said, this is a process, not a single moment in time. Certain areas, difficult ones, must be turned over to an Afghan lead while US forces are thinned out but remain available in extremis. Whether this is possible should become clearer over the next year. The Afghan army must be given some opportunity to learn, even to fail, before suddenly being left on its own.

Additionally, the Afghan central government must control the more rapacious local leaders and institute a modicum of fair government so that there is a reason for Afghans to support the government. This is easy to say and incredibly difficult to do. Afghans must overcome thirty years of divisive politics. We are spending a great deal on development and governance; quite possibly too much in terms of what Afghanistan can actually absorb. We may well be fueling a culture of dependency and corruption that does them no good since we cannot sustain the cost.

Yet, having said this I would be very hesitant to suggest that we can have fully shaped policy answers. Afghans, not we, have to work out acceptable political institutions. That took us years after the Articles of Confederation, a secret convention, a grueling ratification campaign and an eventual civil war. I doubt a foreign design would have made our process easier.

In the near term we must recognize, as we are beginning to do that we do bear some responsibility as well for the corruption. We have strengthened warlords, paid little attention to who got contracts and what we paid, and then blamed all the problems on the Afghans while demanding a change to "good government" that was far more complete, and therefore unrealistic, than the situation in any of the surrounding countries. More recently, we are starting to focus more narrowly on behavior that really hurts the war effort and on key institutions like the army. I endorse this fine tuning of the anti-corruption policy.

What we can do is to add greatly to the growth of modern, educated Afghans capable of adjusting their country to something other than a culture of feuding "commanders" and short term political bargains. Funding educational exchanges in the long run is worth more than cash for work or seed programs not tied to markets, although both have their place.

We can work hard to maintain political space so that new ideas, a free media, and different political ideas can put down roots. We must do our best to ensure that the Afghan Army remains multi-ethnic, professional and non-political. We need to come to decisions about how we will approach the Afghan elections of 2014. That decision should follow from our decisions on forces and money—the tools of influence—and take into account what is realistically achievable.

These are all long term visions and none of them will be possible without expanded security. Hence I return to the absolute need to get the transfer to Afghan lead right; fast enough to inspire confidence and not so wedded to a timetable as to rush to failure.

Mr. Chairman, Senator Lugar, you asked further what broader policy considerations should be part of the dialogue. Two that are frequently discussed are a regional solution and negotiation. I support working on both while realizing that neither is quick or an alternative to fighting. In fact, seen as a quick alternative to war, each would become a serious mistake.

There exists a long history of negotiation to end such conflicts and it is instructive. Choose your model; Cambodia, Namibia, El Salvador, Algeria with the French, or our own experience in negotiating the end to the American Revolution. Each took years of talking. Most took some years of talking about talking before serious discussion began. To expect less in Afghanistan is absurd, particularly since it is not clear whether or not the Taliban leadership is interested.

Because negotiating any peace that meets our strategic needs is a long process it makes sense to begin as soon as possible—but not to be in an excessive haste to conclude. We should negotiate in support of President Karzai. He is the leader of a sovereign state that must live with the result. He needs to know that he has solid US backing to achieve a good agreement. And by our presence in the negotiations we can, if we choose, also act to reassure other elements in Afghanistan that their most essential freedoms will not be sacrificed.

It is often remarked that Afghanistan had a long period of peace when its neighbors left it alone. We do need to focus on recreating a regional basis for peace. We need also to understand what that means. A regional solution requires that the neighbors realize they cannot achieve their maximum desires. It is not clear to me if Pakistan realizes that. Perhaps they will not until an Afghan army is competent enough not to lose. Recognizing limits to ambition may require the US to renounce permanent bases and influence projection that potentially threatens Iran and Russia. India also needs to be willing to observe limits in its own influence with Afghan parties since the struggle for influence between India and Pakistan is another source of tension.

Additionally, a regional solution still requires the existence of an Afghan government capable of preserving internal order. If many Afghan parties contend for power then they will draw in foreign support. Support of one power will draw in another to protect its interests. The result would be the rapid destruction of an agreement on neutrality. Hence, with regard to a regional peace I believe that we should start discussing the idea now because it is necessary but we should avoid any idea that this approach can be a short cut to the exit.

Some comments on strategies offered by others:

Pakistan vs. Afghanistan: Some commentators have noted that Pakistan is the bigger issue and therefore suggested a shifting of US efforts toward Pakistan. I agree on the importance of Pakistan but one must be careful to see what is at issue and, therefore, the necessary response. Pakistan's policy over three decades has been driven by three factors, although their relative weight has shifted in senior Pakistani thinking. One is fear of India, including the ability of India to threaten it from Afghanistan. The second is a desire to either control or exercise preeminent power over the government in Afghanistan, both for Pakistan's own interests and to preempt new Pushtun threats to Pakistan's unity. Third, and more recently, Pakistan has had to contend with threats from radical Islam within Pakistan.

It is entirely possible that the first two themes remain dominant in Pakistani strategic calculations. In oversimplified terms this means that if the United States appears likely to leave Afghanistan then Pakistan will make a bid for dominance. Its tools will be Taliban insurgents with which it has maintained ties.

I am of the opinion that Pakistan's strategy would fail; that they would trigger a civil war in Afghanistan, that their clients would not be able to control the whole country. However, while they were engaged in an effort to control Afghanistan in alliance with radical Islamic elements I think it likely that Pakistan would not do a good job of confronting its own radicals.

This is a complicated subject that merits expanded discussion at another time. Now I only want to draw out two policy points. First, Pakistani thinking about its strategy will be much more heavily influenced by whether it believes the United States will persevere in Afghanistan—something it does not now believe--than by continuing our decade's failure to convince

Pakistan to alter its basic strategic calculus about its interests in Afghanistan and see things our way.

Second, if Pakistan proceeds as outlined above and does not deal strongly with its own radicals, the influence of the latter is likely to expand and with it their threat to the Pakistani state. We should be alert to this very dangerous threat. We should respond to it better than we have in terms of our Pakistani and regional policy. Yet in doing so we should understand that our action or inaction in Afghanistan will be a large, perhaps the largest element in Pakistan's understanding of where its interests lie.

Decentralization: Two arguments are particularly frequent on the subject of decentralization. One is that we need to return to traditional Afghan structures. The other is that by building up local forces we can sidestep the messy process of reinforcing a central government. Both arguments have some merit but both are massively overstated and misunderstand much about current Afghanistan.

The old structure might better be characterized as parallel government (a term I owe to anthropologist Dr. Thomas Barfield who is much more of an authority on this subject than am I) in which the state was responsible for a limited range of functions while others belonged to tribes and communities. Recreating this structure runs into all sorts of problems. The old state had little to no responsibility for development. This is clearly no longer acceptable to Afghans. Yet communities and tribes have no resources for development. At the same time, the tribal leaders were considerably stronger than is now the case. Years of warfare and the growth of militia leaders have weakened tribal authority as have the insurgent's systematic assassination of tribal leaders. Some form of more decentralized government may well be necessary in Afghanistan. However, it will have to be a new evolution created by Afghans, not an effort by superficially informed foreigners to recreate a partially mythical past.

Local forces may well be an important component of Afghan defense. However, to rely on them as a game changer is a mistake. The record of such forces in Afghanistan is one of creating militias responsive to commanders who feud with one another, terrorize their neighbors, and are incapable of unity against the Taliban. It is exactly the rapacious behavior of such local forces that created the conditions that led many Afghans to welcome the Taliban in the 1990s. The same overbearing behavior and settling of old scores is held by many observers to be a primary cause of the resurgent insurgency in Kandahar and Helmand.

We have a long record of the failures of such forces, including the effort to build the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP) during my time. The new effort at constructing units called Afghan Local Police (ALP) is somewhat more promising but only because it is being managed very carefully to avoid the problems of the past. That very care keeps it slow. It is not a program that can be expanded quickly without leading to failure. Nor does the ALP program have the potential to be more than a useful adjunct to regular security forces. Having talked extensively with the people who are running the program it is clear that ALP units will be attacked this year. Their survival under serious attack will depend on back up from ISAF and

Afghan forces. This is a mix of forces that may work but it illustrates why reliance on such local forces must be limited at best. Additionally, there are a variety of so called "village security forces" that are far more problematic in their composition and leadership. Many of these should be disbanded or, at least, not supported by us since they lack appropriate oversight and may alienate more people than they secure.

Counter-terrorism will be a component of any military campaign. However, it is sometimes spoken of as a policy alternative in terms of keeping just enough force to strike terrorists and get out of nation building. I will not try to summarize a complicated discussion but I want to make one policy point that seems frequently overlooked and would probably doom too great a reliance on counter terrorism—it offers nothing to Afghans except endless killing. Just striking enemies may appear to meet US policy goals on terrorism but this is illusionary. Effective strikes must depend on intelligence gathered on the ground. If all we have to offer Afghans is a permanent condition of the brutality of the last three decades then many will prefer the Taliban, will prefer anything to the continuation of such a strategy. They will ask us to leave or push us out. And without assets on the ground we will not have the intelligence to carry out counter terrorist strikes successfully. Thus the policy would fail.

Mr. Chairman, Senator Lugar, thank you again for inviting me to testify. I believe deeply that failure in Afghanistan will lead to years of dangerous instability in Central and South Asia and increased threats to the United States. A bloody, long lasting civil war in Afghanistan that draws in Pakistan, Iran, Russia and possibly the US would further poison relations across the region with dangerous and unpredictable consequences for our own interests.

Even the modest success I have described is not assured. Yet we have a much better chance of succeeding than we had two years ago. We have no short cuts that hold any promise of working. Poised between what I see as the realistic alternatives we need to clarify our modest long term purpose in Afghanistan, make clear that our goals do not threaten Afghanistan's neighbors, get on with building the Afghan security forces and continue to strengthen better governance at a realistic, long term pace. Over the next few years such an approach can lower our financial burden to a sustainable level.

Mr. Chairman, Senator Lugar, I understand the gravity of our deficit. However, I understand also, as I believe you do, that the United States does not have the luxury of pursuing only one interest at a time. The choice is to persevere responsibly or to run quickly to some patchwork strategy that will cost us much more in the long run.

I would be pleased to respond to your questions.

[ii] Ronald E. Neumann was Ambassador to Algeria, Bahrain and Afghanistan. Now President of the American Academy of Diplomacy. However, his testimony represents only his own views, not those of the Academy.