

Testimony of Thomas R Pickering

Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Afghanistan

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is an honor to appear before you today to address one of the most pressing and emergent issues we face as a nation -- one which for too long has been hidden by our focus and concentration on other issues in the region and beyond.

In recognition of the growing crisis in Afghanistan, three major American organizations each carried out independent studies of what was happening and what needs to be done to deal with the problems. It is no accident that the issue is so exigent, that when the three organizations gathered to discuss their reports, they immediately agreed to issue their reports together and to join forces in their presentations. That was done yesterday afternoon.

Today's hearing gives me a chance to highlight aspects of the report I had the welcome pleasure of co-chairing with General James Jones, former NATO SACEUR and US Combatant Commander in Europe. He joins me on the panel today and will present his own views on the report and its salient features.

My task is a simple one. In order to highlight the urgency and the importance of the issue I want to present to you a summary of the report's key conclusions on what is happening now, as we meet, in Afghanistan. Secondly, I want to provide you with the most important recommendations of a distinguished group of panel members each one of whom has had extensive experience in Afghanistan and the region. I don't claim special knowledge or experience in Afghanistan and have relied heavily on the team's expertise to make and justify our conclusions and recommendations. I have drawn heavily on the language of the report to assure that their conclusions are concisely and crisply conveyed to you.

Assessment:

Afghanistan is at a critical crossroads. Six years of progress is under serious threat from resurgent violence, weakening international resolve, mounting regional challenges and a growing lack of confidence on the part of the Afghan people.

The US and the international community have tried to win the struggle with too few military, insufficient economic aid, and without a clear and consistent strategy. We must now deal with reconstituted Taliban and al Qa'eda forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a runaway opium economy and the severe poverty faced by most Afghans.

Why is this so important to us?

In the words of our report, success in Afghanistan is a critical national security imperative. Failure means new threats from the Taliban and al Qaeda from a renewed sanctuary for them in Afghanistan to the detriment of our interests in the region and at home.

Internationally, we are seeing a weakening of resolve among our friends and partners. Polls show public attitudes are divided on bringing troops from their countries home immediately or remaining until the country is stabilized. In all but the US and the UK majorities called for withdrawal as soon as possible.

It is clear that there is a lack of an overall, overarching strategic vision to reinvigorate the effort to attain unified, reachable goals.

This year has been the deadliest for US and coalition troops since the invasion of 2001.

The most immediate threat is from the anti-government insurgency that has grown significantly in the last two years. Attacks against Afghan military and police forces have also surged. Some success has been achieved in targeting Taliban leadership, but significant areas of Afghanistan, particularly in the south have been lost to friendly control.

Some of our allies believe the mission is failing and several NATO members are wavering in their troop commitments, offsetting the strong involvement of Britain, Denmark, Poland, Canada, Australia and the Netherlands among others.

A failure of NATO in Afghanistan would damage the future of the organization itself.

Realizing an Afghanistan that is stable and secure and free of influence from radical, Islamic forces is a core objective. Taliban and al Qaeda maintain close links.

There is an acute need for international coordination on both the military and civilian side. Separate military commands with some overlapping missions complicate the process as does the lack of a senior civilian leader. The recent inability to appoint Lord Paddy Ashdown of the United Kingdom (UK) as a result of objections from the Karzai Government means we are back to square one in trying to find a solution to that critical issue.

Military and especially police training are lagging as are counter narcotics efforts and judicial and penal reform.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) fielded by many governments have separate reporting channels back to their capitals and there is no unified field theory on how they should operate, be coordinated or accomplish their missions.

A recent report in the Washington Post concluded that: “While the (US) military finds success in a virtually unbroken line of tactical achievements, (US) intelligence officials worry about a looming strategic failure”.

Six years after the fall of the Taliban Government in Afghanistan the country is still facing a fundamental crisis of governance. Without an honest, sustainable government there can be little effective development and even less political legitimacy. The country has “a stunning dearth of human capital” and a number of leaders, often in the provinces, are considered to be serial human rights abusers by much of the population. This shakes confidence in the rule of law and democracy and overall governance in critical ways. Underpaid civil servants are asked to undertake dangerous counter narcotics missions and easily fall prey to bribery and corruption in return.

The public looks to the government not only for housing and health care, roads and schools, but just as much if not more for security and justice. At present the government cannot do this and this leads neighbors, aid donors and troop contributors to hedge their bets.

Former US Commander, LTG Karl Eikenberry, has said the greatest long-term threat is not the resurgence of the Taliban but “the potential irretrievable loss of the Government of Afghanistan”.

Equally, if not more disturbing are important findings from 2006 showing the spread of narcotics cultivation from 165,000 hectares to 193,000; more land than is under coca cultivation than in Latin America. And while some key provinces in the north and center are being reported as opium free, those provinces continue to profit handsomely from drug trafficking.

Extensive receipts from this activity, “drug money” weakens key institutions and fuels and strengthens the Taliban., while at the same time corrupting the country’s governmental leadership.

There are serious disputes about how best to deal with the drug economy. Some want large, scale aerial eradication with the potential for serious, disruptive impacts on rural Afghans and their livelihood. Others are counseling more gradual but more complete approaches seeking to find crop substitutes and other supports for the 90 percent of Afghans who have said they are willing to abandon poppy cultivation if they can count on earning half as much from legal activities.

Closely linked, but also independently important for Afghanistan’s future, are questions of development and reconstruction. It is the second lowest country on the UN’s human development index for 2007-08. Life expectancy is short, infant mortality high and access to clean water and health services severely limited. Nevertheless there are some positive economic indicators -- 8.7% growth (against a small base), low inflation, a stable currency against the dollar and significant foreign exchange reserves. Refugees are

returning, agricultural output is up and roads are being repaired and rebuilt to the rural areas.

The lack of security has disrupted trade, communications, transport and the energy infrastructure.

Even after six years, foreign assistance amounts are hard to tabulate and coordination is weak. School populations have boomed particularly among girls and efforts are being made to fund primary health care. While some experts say it is an exaggeration, claims that only 10% of assistance gets to Afghans are worthy of attention and a correction of these faults is badly needed.

Finally, Afghanistan can no longer be considered as an isolated state to be dealt with on its own. It is vulnerable as never before to external pressure and what goes on, especially in the Pakistan border region, is critical to success or failure. Kabul needs better relations with its neighbors, especially coordination with Pakistan and a commitment on the part of Pakistan to deal with its own tribal areas FATA, something that is particularly challenging and elusive and has been over the history of modern Pakistan.

With all of these difficulties there is clear reason why we call attention to the need to improve and make more strategic and effective our support for Afghanistan. It is a state poised for a slide. Our ability to provide the help and support needed to make a difference remains a key factor. And for that purpose, I want to provide from our report a key list of major recommendations. The report itself should be consulted for the full list which is put together with the objective of forming a coherent and collective whole.

The recommendations are divided into three overarching recommendations and six groups – international coordination, security, governance and the rule of law, counter-narcotics, economic development and reconstruction, and Afghanistan and its neighbors.

I - Overarching Recommendations:

Create an Eminent Person Group from among our allies and partners to put together a long-term coherent strategy.

Decouple Legislative and Executive Branch consideration of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Develop a unified management structure led by a Special Envoy to Afghanistan to coordinate and lead all aspects of US policy and implementation.

II - Key Issue Recommendations:

1. International Coordination –

Work to consolidate the command structure, missions and rules of engagement to simplify and clarify lines of authority and strategic objectives.

NATO needs to review its command and control arrangements to simplify and streamline them.

Appoint a high-level civilian coordinator under UN mandate to work closely with the Afghan Government and to oversee the full range of activities including contacts with regional governments.

Develop an agreed concept of operations, goals and objectives.

2. Security -

Increase the number of NATO troops and match quantity with quality

Focus more efforts on the training of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and provide training, adequate pay and equipment to the Afghan National Police (ANP) so they can maintain security once coalition forces depart.

Increase the US role in rebuilding the ANP.

Work to reduce civilian casualties with a goal of “zero civilian casualties”.

Better integrate Afghan forces in US and NATO planning and operations.

Develop with the international community a coordinated strategy in support of President Karzai’s political reconciliation efforts.

Create a regional plan to target risks coming out of the border with Pakistan involving both the Afghan and Pakistan Governments and work with Pakistan to get it more closely to incorporate FATA into Pakistan.

3. Governance and Rule of Law –

A coherent and resourced strategy to increase the reach, capacity and legitimacy of the Afghan Government should be a top priority.

Refocus efforts to develop an integrated and effective judicial system,

Develop governmental pockets of competence in the country, bringing together the judiciary, justice and prosecutorial and police functions.

4. Counter-Narcotics –

Build and sequence the introduction and use of the core tools of counter-narcotics – crop eradication, interdiction (arrests and prosecutions) and economic development.

Increase investment in development – infrastructure and industry.

Enhance interdiction efforts.

In lieu of massive eradication adopt an ‘Afghan centric’ approach, including public information campaigns, voluntary restraint, full delivery of announced programs for alternative livelihood, and provision of all the services for alternative crops now provided by drug traffickers – (agricultural extension, futures contracts, guaranteed marketing, financing and micro finance).

Beware of negative effect of large scale eradication without careful support mechanisms and programs on support for the government and its programs.

5. Economic Development and Reconstruction –

The Afghan Government should get more credit for development and it needs help to improve its accounting and anti-corruption defenses.

Get Afghans to appoint an Afghan development czar.

Spread development more evenly around the country

Follow up quickly clearance of Taliban forces from provinces with development assistance.

Enhance infrastructure development

Afghanistan and its Neighbors –

Embark on a sustained and long term effort to reduce antagonisms between Afghanistan and Pakistan with the goals of rooting out support for the Taliban and its ideology, closing down extremist madrassahs and training camps and encouraging a relaxation of Pakistani restrictions on the transport of goods to Afghanistan. The Afghans should continue to be urged to accept the Durand line as its border with Pakistan.

Pakistan needs to be encouraged to regain physical control in the FATA.

An effort needs to be made to resume conversations with Iran to coax out greater cooperation in helping to stabilize Afghanistan.

A regional peace process should be developed, beginning with confidence building measures, with the eventual goal for Afghanistan becoming a neutral state protected by commitments against interference in its internal affairs, clandestine weapons supply and a comprehensive regime to support the flow of trade.

Conclusion:

This is a critically important issue for this administration in the United States and for the next. There are many problems. Among the most important are governance and the building of Afghan capacity in all areas, drug cultivation, security in the border areas, and cooperation among our allies.

The urgency is real. The problems can be dealt with. It will require new and enlarged efforts by this committee and the Legislative and Executive branches working together.

I look forward to your questions and comments.