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“Assessing the Transition in Afghanistan”

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“ASSESSING THE TRANSITION IN AFGHANISTAN”

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to offer my views on the status of the Afghan transition. The views I express today are solely my own and do not represent those of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), which does not take policy positions.

My recent involvement with Afghanistan has mainly been as a co-chair with John Podesta of a bipartisan expert senior working group convened in 2011-2012 by USIP and the Center for American Progress (CAP). The working group focused on U.S. strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in particular on the need for a clear political strategy to guide our security and economic strategies. We produced five policy white papers, making recommendations on political and economic components of U.S. strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, and met multiple times privately with senior administration officials to share our views. The administration encouraged us also to share our views with Congressional leaders, which we did through a series of briefings in 2012. This year, John and I have co-chaired two ad hoc off-the-record meetings with experts and senior administration officials to focus on Afghanistan's political transition and specifically the 2014 Afghan elections.

Our CAP-USIP Senior Working Group (SWG) concluded that the US government's objective in Afghanistan should be a relatively stable Afghanistan that does not slide back into civil war, destabilize its neighbors, or once again become a haven for transnational terrorist groups. While this outcome is desired by nearly all Afghans, it has been thwarted by the Taliban and other

armed insurgent groups, neighboring countries, as well as the short-term concerns of powerful Afghan actors who have undermined the consolidation of democratic government institutions.

But more than the peace and prosperity of Afghanistan is at stake. A safe, secure, and prosperous Afghanistan is an essential element to achieving stability, peace, and prosperity in all of northwest Asia -- Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, the Central Asian states, and even Iran and Russia. For this cannot be a stable, prosperous region free from terror unless these conditions can be achieved in Afghanistan.

The problems associated with achieving stability in Afghanistan have been exacerbated by general hedging strategies among Afghans and their neighbors that are partly the result of uncertainties regarding the extent to which the U.S. is committed to Afghanistan post-2014.

The unfortunate recent press accounts of a “zero option” – even if ultimately disavowed -- are extremely damaging in this regard. The U.S. and its allies need to be actively countering the narrative of abandonment that is frequently heard in Afghanistan. The best way to do this would be for the U.S. government to make clear as soon as possible its intention to have a robust troop presence in Afghanistan well beyond 2014 and to announce the size of that troop deployment now even before negotiations have concluded on the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) that will provide the legal framework for this troop presence. The U.S. government should be clear that it is ready to negotiate an acceptable BSA with the current Afghan government or, if necessary, to leave that negotiation to the post-2014 government. But the U.S. troop commitment needs to be made clearly and it needs to be made now. This will do three things:

1. It will reassure Afghans that their votes in the 2014 election will count for something because the government they elect will have the international support it will need to succeed;
2. It will encourage candidates to come forward to stand for election;
3. And it will lessen the ability of some Afghan elements to use the BSA negotiations as a political football in service of other agendas.

Security Transition

Last month, full responsibility for security in all of Afghanistan's districts was formally handed over to Afghan forces. The army that the U.S. and its NATO allies have spent a decade helping to build and train has become one of the most trusted institutions in the country. Now it will have the opportunity to prove its worth to the Afghan people. According to the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), at its current capability, the Afghan National Army should be able to hold its own against the Taliban. Its best units, especially its special forces, are excellent. Its main deficiency is that it continues to suffer from high rates of attrition. Under the right conditions, these problems can be solved if the international community continues to provide the levels of support promised at the Chicago NATO Summit last year. At an operational level, therefore, the security transition is on track.

The crucial question for the security transition is not about tactics or firepower, but whether these forces are united around the idea that they are a national force defending a legitimate government supported by all elements of Afghan society. At this point, the political transition is the most critical of the three transitions that will occur in 2014 – security, political, and economic. While

the security transition is well underway, and good progress has been made, it cannot succeed unless the 2014 elections are relatively free and fair and produce a government viewed as legitimate and supported by the Afghan people and accepted by Afghanistan's neighbors and the international community. If instead 2014 produces a corrupt and tainted election discredited in the eyes of the Afghan people and causing either the chaos of no coherent government or one viewed as illegitimate by the Afghan people, then we will be transitioning security responsibility to a government in political meltdown – one that is unlikely to be able to command the support of the Afghan National Army and the other security forces. At that point, the force could splinter along ethnic lines, contributing to instability and national fragmentation, violence, and perhaps a return to civil war.

Economic Transition

A successful political transition is also critical to the 2014 economic transition. Afghanistan's economy has demonstrated significant growth over the past twelve years. The national currency has remained remarkably stable, only beginning to slide recently as a result of fears of instability beyond 2014. Much of this economic success has been the result of billions of aid dollars that have flowed into Afghanistan. As the transition continues, this funding will be reduced, and Afghanistan will need to supplement it with its own resources. The country has those resources, for example in vast potential mineral wealth, but needs to develop them. This will require a level of stability that allows construction and extraction, a regulatory framework that encourages investment, and a government that is effective enough to tackle corruption and ensure that the taxable revenues from the private sector and foreign donors end up in the national treasury, not in the pockets of politicians. The underlying condition for all of the above is, again, a legitimate

government after 2014 supported by the Afghan people and that can begin to put in place the economic policies that will allow Afghanistan to achieve real sovereignty by reducing its reliance on foreign donors.

Political Transition

The question is how can this legitimate government with popular support and improved governance come about? An open, free, and fair election with broad Afghan participation offers the best opportunity to reconcile the whole of Afghan society which currently feels largely excluded from the political process. As part of an inclusive peace process, the U.S. and Afghan governments have tried to test the Taliban to distinguish those who wish to reenter the political process from those who wish to continue their war on Afghan society. Efforts to date have failed, with the Taliban refusing to participate in talks with the Afghan government and now talking of closing their Doha office.

While outreach to the Taliban should continue in a very careful way during the pre-election period, the best time to test Taliban intentions will be after the conclusion of a successful election by a government of renewed legitimacy and popular support, backed by an army loyal to that government, and supported by a significant post-2014 U.S. and coalition presence. In the interim, efforts should be focused on ensuring a successful election, which should include efforts to convince the Taliban to reduce violence levels during the election period and perhaps even agree to local ceasefires. The Pakistani government should be enlisted in this effort. There should also be a robust communication plan by which primarily Afghan voices make clear that those

who seek to derail the elections through fraud or violence are the true enemies of a peaceful and prosperous future for the Afghan people.

Ultimately, the best prospect for achieving a stable Afghanistan will be a peaceful transition to a new government based on a free and fair presidential election in 2014 that is credible and produces an outcome that is accepted by the Afghan people. This outcome must be the U.S. government's top priority in Afghanistan for the coming year. Afghanistan's constitution gives immense powers to the president, especially the power to appoint the most important figures in government, including cabinet members, supreme court judges, police chiefs, as well as provincial and district governors. A new president will offer the opportunity for a new governing team that is capable of commanding support from throughout the country and making the necessary political and economic reforms.

A government of renewed legitimacy and popular support, backed by an army loyal to that government and supported by a significant post-2014 U.S. and coalition presence, would be a powerful counter-force to the Taliban. A more effective government that is able to administer prompt justice even-handedly and increasingly deliver basic services to Afghans would provide a stark and compelling contrast to the Taliban, whose main strategy has been to deny Afghans access to government services and whose main tactics have resulted increasingly in the killing of innocent Afghans. Such a revitalized Afghan government, backed by long-term international support, and with a smaller but still significant international military footprint, would undermine Taliban efforts to represent themselves as legitimate national political actors. And such a government would then be in a position to attract in to the political process those Taliban

prepared to surrender arms and turn to peace while leaving those that reject this offer to be dealt with by the Afghan army.

While credible elections are clearly crucial to achieving stability in Afghanistan, there are serious questions as to whether the 2014 elections will take place under conditions conducive to ensuring a legitimate broadly supported outcome. As the Wall Street Journal pointed out in an article on July 10, the failure of the Afghan legislative and executive branches to produce two electoral laws crucial to the effective conduct of the election would create real operational and political problems. If Parliament fails to do so before it adjourns, these electoral institutions would very likely be established by presidential decree without the political consensus that parliamentary adoption would bring. The opposition has legitimate concerns that an electoral playing field created by presidential decree, and with little consultation, will be tilted against them.

Operationally, there is not much time to set up these institutions, adding to the serious logistical and security problems that will have to be addressed prior to elections now scheduled for April 5, 2014. Afghan political elites, representatives of the government, civil society, and all friends of Afghanistan need to encourage parliament and the President to come together and adopt these necessary laws before parliament adjourns.

President Karzai's role in this transition is central. Many critical things have been said about him. I worked with him closely when I was in government. I respect him as a leader facing incredible challenges, who has not always received the respect or support he deserved in seeking to meet those challenges. He has begun the process of creating law-based, democratic institutions in his country. His legacy can now be to ensure the continuation of this process and setting his

country on a course toward peace and prosperity. That process begins by ensuring a free and fair election in 2014 that produces a legitimate government supported by the vast majority of the Afghan people. If President Karzai steps up to this historic role, it behooves all Afghans to ensure that he can live in peace and honor in his country after his presidential term is complete.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations on what needs to be done to support the upcoming political transition in Afghanistan. The primary responsibility for this transition – rightly – belongs to Afghans. Our main responsibility is to help to advance and not to undermine their efforts to hold a successful election and to achieve an effective handover of power to the next elected governing team.

1. **Credible elections are the top priority** -- The U.S. government must send a clear and consistent message, in words and deeds, that the elections are the top priority. We must be aware that there is a credibility gap between our stated commitment to the 2014 elections and the degree to which our commitment is believed by key Afghan actors. Our regional allies and partners can help to reinforce this message.
2. **Acts count as much as words:** We must be seen to invest political capital in helping to ensure the election takes place. It has been clear to Afghans that we have invested political capital in the Doha process. They must see a similar investment of political capital in the electoral process. The U.S. should also encourage consensus-building efforts among Afghan political actors to facilitate the emergence of electoral coalitions able to garner nation-wide, multi-ethnic support.

3. **Logistics and security:** NATO ISAF forces should work with Afghan security forces to begin planning for the security and logistical challenges of the election. This can be part of the post-security handover training and assistance mission. Support for an impartial election is a way for the Afghan security forces to demonstrate their capacity to act in the interest of the nation. Early and consistent public education messages are also essential.
4. **Support a dignified post-presidency role for President Karzai** – The United States must allay any uncertainties that President Karzai might have about the U.S. commitment to support him in a dignified and secure post-presidency.
5. **Counter the abandonment narrative** – The uncertainty regarding the future of the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan is a major cause of hedging strategies that undermine the current transition. The Bilateral Security Agreement should be concluded as soon as possible, or failing that, the U.S. should state publicly now its commitment to maintaining a specified and significant number of U.S. troops post-2014.
6. **Protect the gains made by women** – One of the most important achievements of the past decade has been the tremendous gains made in protecting and promoting the rights of Afghan women. Afghanistan needs the resources and inputs of all of its population to resolve its problems and take advantage of its opportunities. The U.S. must continue to press that these rights, currently guaranteed in the Afghan constitution, be both preserved and made real for more Afghan women post-2014.
7. **Look for opportunities presented by Pakistan’s new government** – The U.S. has an opportunity with the new Pakistani government to find ways in which Pakistan’s legitimate security concerns can be addressed through a framework in which Pakistan’s

and Afghanistan's sovereignty are mutually reinforced, while the U.S. maintains good relations with both.

The U.S. and the international community have eighteen months in which to align efforts behind an overriding objective of a successful political transition. If this is done with clarity and purpose, there is a strong chance of consolidating much of what has been achieved over the past twelve years. It is clearly time to transition the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan to a more sustainable level. But we must manage this transition period extremely carefully to protect the gains that have been achieved at such great cost.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and I am happy to take questions.