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TESTIMONIES

The War in Afghanistan in Strategic Context

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Resources: Strategy & Policy

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the subcommittee, I welcome the opportunity to discuss our strategy in Afghanistan and to place it within the context of our overall strategic position.

Background to the Current Situation

In its march 2009 white paper on Afghanistan and Pakistan, the administration correctly identified the key aspects of the threat posed by the radical Muslim groups centered in western Pakistan. At that time, the president wisely announced a strategy centered on classic counterinsurgency principles, with emphasis on securing the Afghan population and enhancing the country's governance. This effort was to be matched by efforts designed to strengthen Pakistan and to ensure its cooperation in confining the enemy groups to a progressively smaller area and eventually eliminating them as a serious threat. As President Obama declared at the time, "we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future. That is the goal that must be achieved."

As recently as August, the president noted that success in the conflict is critical to our nation's security when he stated that Afghanistan "is not a war of choice. It is a war of necessity." He went on to say that, "if left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans." Clearly, the president believes the consequences of losing the war are quite high, and, from that, one might reasonably infer that he is willing to incur substantial risks to achieve his war aims.

In may the president named a new commander of the war effort in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, to execute this strategy and achieve his stated war objectives. Given that the general was hand-picked by the administration, it seems reasonable to assume that he shared its assessment of the threat's character and the strategy for defeating it. Moreover, based on those portions of the McChrystal report that were leaked to the public, the general's plan for implementing the administration's strategy appears both consistent with the strategy and militarily sound.

General McChrystal's review was followed by a request for additional troops to execute the strategy, and this request is being reviewed by the president. The decision on whether to honor this request would seem to center on the answers to two questions: first, "What level of force is needed to achieve our war objectives?" and second, "What risks do we incur in providing this level of support?" Put another way, if the risks of providing the support outweigh the benefits of achieving our objectives, or if some previously unknown major flaws in the strategy have emerged, then the strategy might have to be reconsidered.

Risks Associated with General McChrystal's Request

Let's address the second question first. Given the high stakes for which the president has stated we are fighting in Afghanistan, will the dispatch of 40,000 additional troops find the United States incurring even greater risks? These risks have been expressed in two general forms. First, the continued deployments of our ground forces—the Army in particular— risks "breaking" the Army (i.e., triggering a precipitous decline in unit combat effectiveness owing to soldiers being deployed too frequently, for too long, into combat zones); and second, that the deployment of an additional 40,000 troops to Afghanistan will leave our military unprepared for other contingencies (i.e., without a strategic land force reserve).

Both the current and former administrations have acted to address these legitimate concerns. The Obama Administration plans to dramatically reduce our troop presence in Iraq. Even if that drawdown in Iraq stabilizes, with 30-40,000 US troops remaining there for an extended period, and even if General McChrystal's request is honored by the president, the combined total of our forces in Afghanistan and Iraq would still be significantly below the levels reached during the Surge. Moreover, thanks to steps taken by the bush and Obama Administrations, the Army and marine Corps have each seen their end-strength increased, by 65,000 soldiers and 27,000 marines, respectively, over the past few years. Recently the Army has been authorized a further temporary end-strength increase of 22,000 soldiers. The Army's reserve Component has also been modestly augmented. Increasing the size of our ground forces by over 100,000 troops further reduces the risk of our ground combat effectiveness suffering a precipitous decline.

To be sure, other contingencies might demand large numbers of ground combat forces, and one would always like to have a large strategic reserve. But no nation, however powerful, has ever had sufficient military capability to eliminate all risk to its security, and the United States is no exception. Moreover, the two contingencies most often discussed as concerns—North Korea and Iran—do not appear to pose immediate threats to our security. Furthermore, in the case of North Korea, our principal source of advantage lies in our air and sea forces, which are far less stressed in Afghanistan and Iraq than our ground forces. While war in another theater of operations cannot be ruled out, the risk appears small, especially when matched against the prospective consequences of failing to accomplish our objectives in Afghanistan.

Why a 40,000 Troop increase?

We now turn to the first question: What level of force is needed to turn the situation around in Afghanistan? As the administration has noted, a major reason for the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan in recent years stems from our inadequate and incremental response to the escalation of enemy activity in 2006. This implies a significant increase in the war effort is warranted. But it also begs the question: How much is enough?

To answer the first question we must have a sense of how these forces would be used. Both President Obama (in his march 2009 statements) and General McChrystal (in his leaked assessment) intend to employ these forces within the context of a counterinsurgency campaign plan. This is important, since if the president and his field commander had a different view of how the war should be fought, the size and shape of the forces required would most likely also be different.

Counterinsurgency plans are quite distinct from plans for conventional war against regular military forces, and also, apparently, from our recent operations in Afghanistan. In conventional warfare, the enemy's military forces and major power centers are often considered its centers of gravity, meaning that losing either would spell defeat. In the two Gulf Wars, for example, the coalition concentrated on destroying Saddam's Republican Guard and capturing key terrain, such as Kuwait (in the First Gulf War) and Baghdad (in the Second Gulf War). But the centers of gravity in counterinsurgency warfare lie elsewhere entirely, and focusing efforts on defeating the enemy's military forces through traditional forms of combat is a mistake.

The current fight has two principal centers of gravity: the Afghan people and the American people. Our enemies understand this, and have made them their primary targets. For the United States, the key to securing center of gravity is winning "hearts and minds." The Afghan people must believe that their government offers them a better life than the insurgents do, and they must believe that the government will prevail. If they have doubts on either score, they will withhold their support. The American people must believe that the war is worth the sacrifice in lives and treasure that is involved in prosecuting the war, and they must believe that progress is being made toward achieving our war objectives. If these conditions cannot be met, Washington will be forced to abandon the fight before the Afghan government and people are capable of standing on their own. The enemy has a clear advantage when it comes to this fight: they only need to win one of the centers of gravity to succeed, whereas the United States must secure both. Making matters even more complicated, a "Catch-22" governs the fight against the insurgency: efforts designed to secure one center of gravity may undermine the prospects of securing the other. For example, increased troop deployments to Afghanistan might increase our chances of securing the support of the Afghan people, but could erode support for the war among the American people, who must incur higher costs in lives and resources, at least in the near-term.

The key to securing the centers of gravity in the current war is to recognize that our forces have overwhelming advantages in terms of combat power and mobility but a key disadvantage in terms of intelligence. Simply stated, if coalition forces know who the insurgents are and where they are, they can quickly suppress the insurgency. The Afghan people are the best source of this intelligence. But this knowledge can only be gained by winning locals' hearts and minds—that is, by convincing them that the insurgents' defeat is in their interest and that they can share intelligence about them without fear of insurgent reprisals.

Toward this end, General McChrystal's strategy, as best it can be divined from his leaked report, conforms closely to the criteria for waging a successful counterinsurgency, the key elements of which are:

- Providing enduring security to the population;
- Undertaking economic reconstruction and development; and
- Supporting efforts at responsible, effective—and legitimate—governance.

As is evident, the successful execution of this strategy will depend on far more than military muscle. The military may create, by providing security, the conditions necessary for success in the economic and political dimensions of the conflict. But military force alone cannot create the end state the administration seeks. With respect to securing the population, General McChrystal's assessment concedes that the "level of resourcing is less than the amount that is required to secure the whole country." This would seem to infer that the 40,000 troop request is designed to enable the administration's strategy, as put forth in march 2009, to be executed, rather than to minimize the risk that the strategy fails. History shows that it is not necessary to secure the entire population at once to defeat an insurgency. General mcChrystal's strategy focuses on securing certain key areas initially and, as these areas are secured and more Afghan forces become available, progressively expanding the effort into contested areas, securing an ever-greater part of the country over time.

A key element of this strategy involves fielding substantial numbers of Afghan security forces, which are the only forces that can credibly provide long-term security to the Afghan people. General McChrystal has presented a realistic estimate of the number of indigenous Afghan security forces needed to accomplish this objective, to include roughly a quarter million troops in the Afghan National Army (ANA). He correctly projects that it will take time to stand this force up, and for it to become effective. In addition to the training and equipping of the ANA, the general wisely plans both to embed advisors with Afghan units at every level, and to have them partner with American units. Not only will this enable Afghan forces to function with more confidence during their transition from training to conducting operations, but it will also provide opportunities for American commanders and advisors to better distinguish between Afghan officers who are capable and those who are incompetent, those who are honest and those who are corrupt, and those who are loyal to the government and those who have a different agenda. Most importantly, the process offers the best prospect of advancing the day when Afghan security forces can begin a large-scale substitution for the NATo forces currently bearing the brunt of the war effort.

This brings us to the matter of effective governance. It is no exaggeration to say that in waging a counterinsurgency the objective is not to outfight the enemy but to “out-govern” him. A legitimate government responsive of its people’s needs is capable of both mobilizing the resources needed to defeat the insurgency and employing them in a way that denies the insurgents’ claim to represent the true will of the people.

The Obama Administration is right to concern itself with the Karzai regime's ability to govern effectively. This concern argues for extending the partnering relationships that General McChrystal plans to implement beyond combat units to include the Afghan national government's ministries as well as the provincial and district governments. President Karzai should understand that our support is conditional on his willingness to remove ineffective or corrupt administrators. Particular emphasis should be given to the interior ministry, which is responsible for the country's police forces, the front-line force in this type of insurgency warfare. of course, the embedding of American and NATo coalition support personnel in these organizations should also accelerate the development of more efficient and effective ministries and governance at the province and district levels. With unity of command, this approach facilitates the effective integration of the military, reconstruction, governance and intelligence elements of the counterinsurgency campaign.

Matters of Concern

Given the preceding discussion, the Obama Administration's ongoing strategy re-deliberation seems counterproductive. To be sure, any strategy merits adjustment as circumstances dictate; however, from General McChrystal's report and his request it appears the strategy has yet to be fully implemented, making its effectiveness difficult if not impossible to evaluate. To be sure, one might question the strategy's prospective efficacy if circumstances had changed radically since March in ways that invalidated the strategy's key assumptions. This does not appear to be the case. While we rightly deplore the Karzai government's blemished record when it comes to honest governance, it is hardly news that the political process in Afghanistan has been characterized by corruption almost since its inception. Thus the principal effect of this temporizing may be to raise doubts on our reliability in the minds of our Afghan and Pakistani allies.

This would be both unfortunate and ironic, as it has the unintended effect of undermining our ability to achieve important war objectives. If we seek to improve Afghan governance, the less confidence Karzai has in our reliability, the more compelled he will feel to engage in patronage and corrupt activities with his country's power brokers. Similarly, if we intend to convince the Pakistanis that they should end their support for the Taliban as their hedge against our abandoning the field in Afghanistan and the rise of India's influence in that country, then we must convince them that we are willing to sustain our role as the principal external power in Afghanistan.

In arriving at a decision on General McChrystal's request, President Obama should avoid the temptation to pursue incrementalism, or to commit forces piecemeal. This approach typically offers defeat on the installment plan. Instead, the president should send a force that is capable of executing his strategy and his field commander's campaign plan.

Finally, there is the matter of an alternative strategy advanced in various forms by analysts across the political spectrum, emphasizing over the horizon air strikes, Special Forces raids and other forms of covert actions against terrorist targets. This strategy would abandon efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and withdraw nearly all our forces from that country.

There is little evidence to suggest that this "whack-a-mole" strategy—the current term of art—would succeed. It has been tried before, and it has been found wanting. In Vietnam it went by the name "search and destroy": success was to be achieved by locating enemy forces and killing as many as possible. We experienced it again with what some called "therapeutic bombing" or "antiseptic warfare" in the period leading up to 9/11, when cruise missile strikes were conducted against al Qaeda sanctuaries in Afghanistan. It reappeared yet again in Iraq as a "whack-a-mole" approach in the period before our forces began conducting a national counterinsurgency campaign during the Surge. Recently, we have employed Special Forces and drone (i.e., unmanned aerial vehicle) strikes against enemy leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many have been killed. Yet, as in Vietnam, this attempt to succeed by generating a "body count" of enemy leaders has not prevented our position from deteriorating.

There is a good reason for this. As we have seen in the past, the air strikes and raids associated with this strategy inevitably produce casualties among innocent civilians because of inherent limitations in the quality and timeliness of intelligence. Consequently, such strikes often produce more insurgents from the alienation it produces among the local populations than they yield in terms of radicals killed. To place such operations at the center of our strategy will likely condemn us to an open-ended—and unsuccessful—military campaign.

A Regional Strategy

Afghanistan is not the only major challenge to our security. our response to this challenge must be placed within a broader context, one that also extends beyond Pakistan. Given our current force commitments, Iraq and Iran must figure prominently in any strategic assessment. Clearly, our ability to sustain a major commitment in Afghanistan is dependent upon the continued move toward a stable Iraq. It is desirable to continue the drawdown of our forces in Iraq. However, for the foreseeable future we should try to avoid lowering our force levels there below 30-40,000 troops. There is an old saying regarding the creation of NATo that applies to Iraq, which states: “NATo is being created to keep the Soviets out, the Americans in [i.e., engaged in Europe], and the Germans down [i.e., from upsetting the stability of Europe].” Similarly, a significant and enduring American presence in Iraq is needed to keep the Americans in, the predators out, and the factions down. Only a significant and enduring American military presence offers a strong guarantee that a still-weak Iraq can withstand pressures from predators (e.g., Iran; al Qaeda) and avoid becoming a victim of conflict among its internal factions (i.e., the Sunni Arabs, Shi’ia Arabs and Kurds). A stable Iraq also reduces Iran’s prospects for creating instability in the region.

Needed: An Overarching Strategy Review

Those afflicted with too narrow a perspective on important issues are said to be “unable to see the forest for the trees.” Mr. Chairman, I commend the committee for its efforts to ensure that the Congress does not suffer from strategic myopia. In this regard, a strategy that focuses narrowly on Afghanistan can be seen as focusing not on trees, but rather on acorns, with a near-term regional strategic focus representing the trees.

The view of the “forest” that we risk missing is driven by major and ongoing shifts in our relative economic standing in the world, by unprecedented demographic trends, by technology diffusion and by the increasingly rapid erosion of our near-monopoly over certain key military capabilities. Simply stated, the military foundation of our global dominance is eroding. For the past several decades, an overwhelming advantage in technology and resources has given our military an unmatched ability to project power worldwide. This has allowed it to guarantee our access to the global commons, assure the safety of the homeland, and underwrite security commitments around the globe. Our grand strategy since 9/11 assumes that such advantages will continue indefinitely. In reality, they are already disappearing.

Several events in recent years have demonstrated that our traditional means and methods of projecting power and accessing the global commons are growing increasingly obsolete—becoming “wasting assets” in the language of defense strategists. The diffusion of advanced military technologies, combined with the continued rise of new powers, such as China, and hostile states, such as Iran, are making it progressively more expensive in blood and treasure—perhaps prohibitively expensive—for the American military to carry out its missions in areas of vital interest, including the Western Pacific and the Persian Gulf. Military forces that do deploy will find it increasingly difficult to defend what they have been sent to protect. Meanwhile, our military’s long-unfettered access to the global commons—including space and cyberspace—is being increasingly challenged.

If history is any guide, these trends cannot be undone. Technology inevitably spreads, and no military has ever enjoyed a perpetual monopoly on any capability. We can either adapt to contemporary developments or ignore them at our peril. There is, first of all, a compelling need to develop new ways of creating military advantage in the face of current geopolitical and technological trends. That means taking a hard look at military spending and planning and investing in certain areas of potential advantage while divesting from other assets.

All this must be accomplished in an environment of high budget deficits projected out as far as the eye can see, a skyrocketing national debt, and significantly diminished resources for a host of national priorities, including national defense. Making matters worse, our traditional allies' fiscal prospects are no better than our own, and, in some instances, substantially worse. We cannot expect more from them; indeed, we are likely to get significantly less.

In short, we confront what is likely to be a more dangerous world but with a diminished capacity to defend ourselves. Before questions about how to adapt military capabilities to future requirements can be considered coherently, there must be a strategic framework. We must develop a comprehensive strategy that addresses a far more formidable set of challenges to our security than that posed by Afghanistan alone. In recent years, whether it be 9/11, Afghanistan or Iraq, we have found ourselves reacting to emerging challenges rather than anticipating them. Ignoring growing challenges to our security will not make those challenges go away. Sooner or later, they will have to be confronted. A decline in our military's ability to influence events abroad may be inevitable; however, it should not be the result of indifference or lack of attention. There are important strategic choices that the United States must make. To avoid those choices now is simply to allow the United States' rivals to make them for us.