



**Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee**  
*Prepared Statement of LTG David W. Barno, USA (Ret.)*  
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Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, Members of the Committee, I'd like to express my appreciation for being invited to appear before you today to address the coming U.S. and NATO transition in Afghanistan. As the war now enters its twelfth year, Americans deserve a serious look at the plans now in place to responsibly conclude our involvement in this long and difficult conflict. My remarks today on that topic reflect my own personal views, and do not represent those of the Center for a New American Security or any other entity.

Unlike our other panelists today, I have had the privilege of commanding the Afghan theater of war. My service there spanned nineteen months from October 2003 to May 2005. My tenure was one of the longest among our eleven different overall U.S. commanders, and occurred at what was certainly a far less violent and more optimistic period of our efforts. Since 2005, I have remained closely in touch with the progress of the war, and have travelled back several times to the theater to observe ongoing operations and speak with Afghans, Pakistanis, Americans and our NATO allies across the region. I have also written and spoken extensively on the course of the conflict during the last eight years.

On a more personal level, both my sons are Army captains who have served a year or more in combat in Afghanistan. Scores of my uniformed friends' sons and daughters -- former playmates of my kids at military posts all across the country -- have served there, where some have been wounded and some killed. My involvement in this very long fight remains thus both personal and professional. I know what it's like as a parent to have a family member at risk in the combat zone. And this outlook is never far from my thinking as I try to reach conclusions about our ongoing efforts, and attempt to think through the road ahead.

Our decisions about transition are set in this context. As we balance seeking to achieve our long-term strategic objectives with the risk inherent in keeping Americans at war in Afghanistan, we must be thoughtful and clear-headed in understanding what has been done, and what can be accomplished at this stage of the war. There is no silver bullet solution, nor any absolute right answer among our looming choices here. But the men and women serving at the tail end of our long war in Afghanistan deserve careful consideration and about the importance of the ends we seek in balance with the lives of young men and women we ask to deliver these ends. In my judgment, their lives only deserve to be put at risk where U.S. vital interests in Afghanistan and this region demand that level of commitment. I know that this calculus is one that this committee takes very seriously.

Before examining the size and scope of U.S. and Afghan security forces looking ahead to 2014 and beyond, it's worth returning to first principles: what vital interests are the United States seeking to defend in Afghanistan and the region after the end of 2014? What are the absolute essentials? Only by fully understanding this basic, minimalist expression of our overall policy goals for the region can we



determine what level of military and financial support will be required in Afghanistan for the this new uncharted period. We all recognize as well that the strategic context of ever-tighter budgets at home driven by years of trillion dollar deficits and a \$16.4 trillion national debt will unquestionably have an impact on decisions on our future commitments in Afghanistan.

In that light then, we must look to U.S. vital interests. As I have noted in previous testimony to this committee in 2011, in my judgment there are three U.S. vital interests at stake in Afghanistan and this region post-2014.

- 1) Preventing the region's use as a base for terror groups to attack the United States and our allies;
- 2) Ensuring nuclear weapons or nuclear materials do not fall into the hands of terrorists or other hostile actors; and,
- 3) Preventing a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan.

In my estimation, protecting these vital U.S. interests in the coming years requires a U.S. base in the region from which to exert influence on all the regional actors, and to keep relentless pressure on terror groups targeting the United States and our allies. Afghanistan presents the most logical and likely location for such a sustained, if necessarily limited, U.S. military presence. The enduring mission of U.S. forces under this scenario is two-fold: counter-terrorism -- to continue to attack al Qaeda elements in the region who pose a transnational threat to the United States and our allies around the world; and support for Afghan security forces -- to train, advise and assist them in their ongoing fight against the Taliban.

In order to continue to protect these interests after 2014, but do so in a way that husbands taxpayers' scarce dollars, the United States will have to significantly reshape its military presence in Afghanistan. This effort is now underway. The President recently announced a withdrawal of 34,000 of the remaining 66,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan between now and this time next year. The bulk of these troops will continue to serve in Afghanistan throughout the coming April-to-October fighting season, thus preserving maximum flexibility for U.S. commanders on the ground. But the mission of these remaining troops has now shifted inexorably to support for Afghan forces in their fight against the Taliban, rather than taking on that direct combat role themselves. This is a new direction, one that has not been the focus of U.S. efforts for most of the past 11 years.

As part of this shift in focus, U.S. forces now fully shift to a train, advise and assist role as Afghan security forces concurrently take lead for security around the country, while. My colleague Andrew Exum and I wrote in December 2011 that the United States should have taken on this primary role in 2012 (which we called security force assistance). While this shift could have come sooner, making this important move now without delay is vital. Only by allowing the Afghan security forces to take lead will we be able to discern where shortfalls in training, equipment and organization exist, and use the 22 months remaining prior to the end of 2014 to fix those shortcomings.

While U.S. forces will draw down to approximately 32,000 by February of 2014, those remaining forces will be well-postured to play a supporting role to the Afghan presidential election set for April of next year. I should note to this committee that neither the U.S. nor other NATO troops have played, nor in my view should play, a *central* role in the security or administration of previous Afghan elections. Afghans view security for their elections as a sovereign responsibility and their security forces are more than capable of taking on this role, as they did in both 2004 and 2009. The political legitimacy derived from conducting a free and fair election -- by Afghan standards -- is an entirely separate question from military security. While critically important in its own right, it does not fall within the scope of the Afghan or U.S./NATO military effort. U.S. diplomacy should be actively working today to help assure such an outcome in 2014. Afghans have never needed tens of thousands of NATO troops in order to secure an Afghan election. Next year will be no different, although international troops can provide useful supporting efforts.

Upon completion of the April 2014 Afghan presidential election, the remaining 32,000 U.S. troops will in turn be drawn down to the final residual presence that the U.S. plans to maintain post-2014. While no decision has yet been announced by the Administration on those ultimate numbers, recent reports from the NATO ministerial in Brussels may provide some clues. Press reports have indicated that the overall NATO presence might range from between 8,000 to 15,000 troops, including U.S. forces. As I have written recently with my colleague Matthew Irvine in the *Washington Post*, I believe a number in this range would be adequate to sustain key U.S. vital interests in the region. Doing so would entail these residual forces performing two key missions: counter-terrorism against al Qaeda remnants, and a limited effort to train, advise and equip Afghan forces. If the current 2:1 ratio of U.S. troops to NATO forces remains in place, that would suggest a number of about 8,000 to 10,000 U.S. troops.

In my estimation, such a scenario would see the bulk of residual U.S. forces rightfully focused on the CT mission, while other NATO troops would focus on training and advising Afghan security forces. This division of labor focuses U.S. forces on the protection of American vital interests while at the same time providing a long-term viable and important role for our allies. Perhaps most importantly, a comprehensive commitment of this nature signifies a long-term and enduring international commitment to our Afghan partners. Such a message will not be lost on the Afghan people, their government, nor the Taliban: that after thirteen years, the West is in fact NOT abandoning Afghanistan. The international commitment to a post-2014 enduring (if much smaller) troop presence, accompanied by sustained and significant funding will buttress Afghan confidence immeasurably. At the same time, such a commitment entirely undermines the Taliban's core narrative of western abandonment and eventual victory.

Two final points require emphasis to the committee today.

First, The United States must continue our financial and moral commitment to the nation and people of Afghanistan. The Afghan war to date has cost the United States more than \$600 billion and over 2,100 American lives, with tens of thousands more wounded. Failing to protect long-term U.S. vital interests in this region after 2014 would largely cast aside all of those painful sacrifices. Such an abandonment would signal a regional retreat that would embolden our adversaries and frighten our friends around the world at



a time when many are already deeply worried about U.S. retrenchment. Protecting our vital interests in this region after 2014 requires not just a commitment of U.S. troops, but a long-term budgetary commitment by the Congress of the United States. Along with funding from our international partners, we must financially sustain the Afghan security forces that will now be the frontline of the fight against the Taliban insurgency.

Second, the United States and NATO needs to re-look the original plan to reduce Afghan security forces from their peak strength of 352,000 to fewer than 240,000 by 2017. It is increasingly clear that implementing this roll-back of Afghan forces while the insurgency continues is deeply unwise. It will undercut the gains made by Afghan forces, undermine their morale at a critical time, and fuel the Taliban narrative of looming victory as most western forces depart. Rather than continue this ill-advised and somewhat arbitrary drawdown, the west should maintain and resource Afghan security forces at current levels for at least five years after most U.S. troops depart in 2014. A five-year period provides adequate time for Afghan forces to fully stabilize their capabilities after the departure of most western troops, and will enable them to sustain their battles with the Taliban without reducing their forces in the midst of an active insurgency fight. This decision will require not only U.S. and international willpower, but the financial support required for Afghan forces to sustain this fight. With Afghan soldier costing about 1/80<sup>th</sup> of the cost of one deployed American, this is a high-return investment in sustaining broader stability in the region. As former Afghan foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah observed in late 2009, “30,000 Taliban will never defeat 30 million Afghans.” Continued financial support for robust Afghan security forces is the essential ingredient that will allow the Afghan people to ultimately prevail against the Taliban insurgency.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to present my views on this long and intractable conflict as the U.S. and our international partners consider the road ahead. In many ways, the coming transition is a tipping point for these long-standing efforts in Afghanistan. Making wise choices at this key juncture can help us secure the gains paid for by Americans and our allies in so much blood and so much treasure over the last decade. Securing our long-term regional vital interests is achievable as we end our combat presence. It will require a limited U.S. and NATO troop footprint paired with sustained international financial support for robust Afghan security forces who will continue to fight a still potent Taliban insurgency. The limited troop deployments and budget outlays required are a prudent investment to help assure stability in this very dangerous part of the world.

## Biography

### **LTG David W. Barno, USA (Ret.)** **Senior Advisor and Senior Fellow, Center for a New American Security**



General Barno, a highly decorated military officer with over 30 years of service, has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the United States and around the world, to include command at every level. He served many of his early years in special operations forces with Army Ranger battalions, to include combat in both the Grenada and Panama invasions. In 2003, he was selected to establish a new three-star operational headquarters in Afghanistan and take command of the 20,000 U.S. and Coalition Forces in Operation Enduring Freedom. For 19 months in this position, he was responsible for the overall military leadership of this complex political-military mission, devising a highly innovative counterinsurgency strategy in close partnership with the U.S. embassy and coalition allies. His responsibilities included regional military efforts with neighboring nations and involved close coordination with the Government of Afghanistan, the United Nations,

NATO International Security Assistance Force, the U.S. Department of State and USAID, and the senior military leaders of many surrounding nations and numerous allies.

From 2006-2010, General Barno served as the Director of the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. Concurrently, he was the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans and Families from 2007-2009. He frequently serves as an expert consultant on counterinsurgency and irregular warfare, professional military education and the changing character of conflict, supporting a wide-range of government and other organizations. General Barno is widely published and has testified before Congress numerous times. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the International Institute of Strategic Studies.

A 1976 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, General Barno also earned his master's degree in National Security Studies from Georgetown University. He is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and the U.S. Army War College. General Barno has received numerous awards for his military and public service.