

HASC Testimony on Afghanistan¹
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The United States can still achieve its strategic objectives in Afghanistan if it maintains and adequately resources its current policy course — and if our Afghan partners do their part, including by successfully navigating the shoals of their presidential election and transition in 2014. This judgment is based on the impressive progress of the Afghan security forces, the significant strides made in areas such as agriculture, health and education, and the promising next generation of Afghans who are poised to gain greater influence over their country's future.

However, the United States and its international partners would risk snatching defeat from the jaws of something that could still resemble victory if, due to frustration with President Hamid Karzai or our own budgetary pressures, we were to accelerate our disengagement between now and 2014 or under-resource our commitment to Afghanistan after 2014.

In the meantime, it is important that Washington and Kabul clarify and solidify their commitment to an enduring partnership as soon as possible. If the United States were to announce the intended size and missions of the U.S. forces planned for the post-2014 period, it would greatly reduce Afghan fears of abandonment and put the pressure on the Afghan government to agree to an acceptable Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). It would also greatly reduce incentives for hedging behavior in Afghanistan and Pakistan and contribute to a constructive atmosphere for the campaigns leading up to the crucial April 2014 Afghan presidential election.

Afghanistan is not a lost cause

Although media coverage of the war has led many Americans to believe that Afghanistan is a lost cause, this is not the case. It is certainly true that this long and costly war has achieved only partial results, corruption in Kabul has remained a serious problem, Pakistan's cooperation with the war effort has been fickle at best, and the insurgency has proved quite resilient.

¹ This testimony draws heavily on a CNAS publication Ms Flournoy co-authored with General John Allen, USMC (Ret.) and Michael O'Hanlon, *Toward a Successful Outcome in Afghanistan*, May 2013.

Nevertheless, the United States now finds itself with a reasonable “Plan B” for achieving its core goal of preventing Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for al Qaeda and its affiliates. The United States can still likely meet its fundamental objectives by continuing to work with partners to degrade the Taliban-led insurgency and create a strong enough Afghan state to hold the country intact. President Obama has been careful to articulate a clear and limited set of objectives for Afghanistan, and these are still largely within reach — even if at greater cost and with somewhat more fragility than initially hoped.

Future American policy should therefore be motivated not by a desire to cut our losses but with a determination to lock in hard-fought gains.

The security situation

Although the Taliban insurgency remains resilient, particularly in the east and south, and though it retains its sanctuary in Pakistan, its momentum on the ground in Afghanistan has stalled. The insurgency is still capable of high-profile suicide bombings, small-scale attacks and intimidation tactics at the local level, but it has not succeeded in winning over Afghan hearts and minds or expanding its control and influence over the country’s major populated areas.

Moreover, the Taliban’s shift to more brutal tactics, such as assassinations of Afghan officials and perceived government or foreign collaborators, is having a polarizing impact. Specifically, it is engendering harsh retaliation measures by some Afghan power brokers and creating the conditions for anti-Taliban uprisings. These include local movements in places such as Zhari and Panjwa’i, in western Kandahar province, and Andar, in Ghazni province between Kabul and Kandahar.

At this stage of the war, the central security question is: Have the United States and its partners degraded the Taliban enough and built the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to be strong enough so the insurgency no longer poses a threat of overrunning the central government? The short answer is: yes, as long as we continue to support the Afghan government and armed forces as planned. Some 80 percent of the population is now largely protected from Taliban violence, which is increasingly limited to the country’s more remote regions. More than half of the country’s violence is concentrated in just 10 of the country’s 400 or so districts. In addition, almost all of the country’s major cities are now secured by the Afghan security forces rather than foreign troops — and the biggest cities have all seen substantial further improvements in security in the last year. Life is generally buzzing in these places; the war is a concern, but not the predominant reality in people’s daily lives.



Certainly, where the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) has shown itself to be corrupt, feckless or absent, the Taliban has gained or maintained influence. But it no longer has the strength to threaten or overthrow the Afghan government. Indeed, the greatest threat to GIROA is probably not the insurgency but GIROA itself, and the risk that key power brokers may seek to rig the coming election.

To be sure, there remains cause for concern. Insurgents continue to threaten some areas near big cities and major roads. And there is good reason to think that many Taliban, having survived more than a decade of attacks by ISAF, are feeling encouraged and confident as these troops largely redeploy by the end of next year. The Taliban might even expect the government to collapse from within just as the Najibullah government did more than two decades ago, after the Soviet withdrawal.

But for all the problems afflicting this government, today's GIROA is nothing like the communist regime imposed by the Soviets. Today's government is a deeply flawed but clearly independent entity. It is elected, even if the elections were less than free and fair. Its president scores reasonably well on public opinion surveys (typically enjoying 60 to 70 percent popularity) even if many also criticize Karzai for his administration's shortcomings. It is representative of all major ethnic groups, with a Pashtun president, interior minister, finance minister and foreign minister; a Tajik first vice president and minister of defense; a Hazara second vice president; and an Uzbek minister of mines, among others. And the government is about to step down from office as the country's constitution requires it to do next year.

Perhaps most of all, the government has, with ISAF help, created multiethnic army and police forces that fight hard for their country as a cohesive whole. Many Afghans, including strong critics of the current government, describe the security forces as "our national pride." Normal Afghan citizens agree; Asia Foundation annual surveys routinely show the army in particular to enjoy more than 80 percent favorability ratings.

The development of the ANSF, especially the Afghan National Army (ANA), has been fundamentally underreported in the Western press. But the ANSF has made serious strides in taking the lead for the country's security in the last half-decade or so:²

² See Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress in Accordance with Section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for 2008, December 2012, pp. 20, 40, 46; Briefing at ISAF NTM-A, Kabul, Afghanistan, March 16, 2013; Briefings at ISAF Headquarters, Kabul, Afghanistan, March 10 and 13, 2013; Briefing at ISAF RC-East Command, Kandahar, Afghanistan, March 14, 2013; Briefing at ISAF Combined Joint Special Operations Command, Kabul, Afghanistan, March 11, 2013; and Statement of General Joseph Dunford, Commander, International Security Assistance Force, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 16, 2013.

- *Afghan forces are now responsible for the security of the entire Afghan population nationwide;*
- *Some 99 percent of military operations in the country are now Afghan led and almost all are independent of ISAF help; most ANSF units are planning and executing operations largely on their own, and this year's campaign plan was written principally by Afghans;*
- *ANSF personnel are now taking almost all of the casualties;*
- *More than 90 percent of ANSF training is Afghan-led;*
- *There has been success in establishing control over key cities and significant lines of communication; most Taliban violence has been pushed farther away from population centers;*
- *Afghan units are becoming increasingly proficient in countering roadside bombs or improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In Regional Command-South, ANSF now has a 70+ percent success rate in finding and clearing IEDs. This is due less to high-technology equipment than to an increase in tips from the local population;*
- *Most Afghan Army Corps commands (the 201st and 203rd in the east, the 205th in and around Kandahar, the 215th in Helmand, the 207th in the west and the 209th in the north) are now implementing an operational readiness cycle for their soldiers to allow for predictable leave periods and thereby to reduce attrition (otherwise known as AWOL) rates;*
- *The Ministers of Defense and Interior have strengthened their focus on replacing or removing Afghan security force leadership that has proved incompetent or corrupt;*
- *While logistical support remains a huge challenge for Afghans, who are not used to the idea of making requests or delivering orders up and down a chain of bureaucratic or military command, there is progress. In the south, for example, Afghan units have been resupplying themselves without significant ISAF help since December;*
- *ANSF special operations forces, within the Ministries of Defense and Interior, have achieved a very high level of competence and are increasingly capable of conducting sophisticated special operations.*

These kinds of specific improvements collectively have enabled a broader positive trend: Different elements of the ANSF are starting to work together more cohesively and often without ISAF support. They are beginning to operationalize a layered security concept. The army clears insurgent strongholds (sometimes now without much ISAF help). The Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), an elite unit with gendarmerie-like qualities, then moves in and establishes stability. Over time they hand off to regular Afghan uniformed police -- admittedly still the weak link in the chain in many areas.

In remote areas, this pattern may be somewhat different. The first stages may be similar, but then the army or the ANCOP hand off responsibilities to Afghan Local Police, essentially armed community-watch organizations of 200 to 300 locals each. Most Afghan commanders like the ALP concept enough that they

are building it into their campaign plans for the coming year and planning to use it as their “hold” force in certain remote but important areas of the country.

There are admittedly problems with some ALP. They can be undisciplined; in the worst case, they can reinforce tribal factionalism and rivalry in a given area. Questions about the ALP may grow, in some cases, as the American special operations forces teams that have been working with them to date gradually come home or are re-missioned in the next couple of years. But the ALP continue to inspire fear in the Taliban perhaps more than any other part of the ANSF, and they suffer more attacks accordingly. This is perhaps because the Taliban recognize that the ALP deprive them of their fictional but powerful narrative that the existing Afghan government and its security forces are illegitimate concoctions of foreign occupiers having little to do with traditional Afghan mores. As such, while the idea of expanding the ALP from the present planned end strength of some 30,000 “guardians” to as many as 45,000 will have to be handled with care, and while a few problematic ALP units may need to be reformed or even disbanded, the United States should continue to focus on helping ALP be more effective and more tightly managed. This requires better integration with district chiefs of police in some places and greater programmatic oversight by the Afghan Ministry of Interior as the U.S. role diminishes. The decision for the centralization of ALP training in the regional training centers should go a long way to professionalizing the force.

Rounding out the picture, the Afghan border police work the country’s borders, and the Afghan air force provides limited air support. These organizations are not as central to the population’s daily security. But they need improvement just the same, as they are still afflicted by too much corruption and lack the capacity they need to be effective.

For the most part, though, the ANSF are working well as a team. All of these cooperative efforts are now mapped out in joint campaign plans. And when crises arise, the ANSF employ Operational Coordination Centers in the various provinces to coordinate their operations. The new norm is that Afghan forces are coming to one another’s aid without ISAF involvement, a development that bodes well for the future.

The Political Situation

In the American media coverage of the war, all eyes tend to be on President Karzai and the crises of the day. But the real make-or-break political event for Afghanistan will likely be the 2014 election. An illegitimate process or outcome could polarize the country ethnically, spark a descent into civil war and so frustrate outside donors that they cut off aid or substantially downsize their long-term security commitments. A legitimate process and solid outcome could make Afghans, who feel great pride in their country, commit further to building up their nation after a generation of warfare and uncertainty. Already, most Afghans

are encouraged by the enormous progress they have experienced in the last dozen years, with GDP growth rates averaging 8 to 10 percent annually and many improvements in the quality of life as well — and they generally do not want to lose these gains.

In light of this situation, what should be the international community's role during the coming year? Although the United States and other key outside nations should not and will not try to pick a winner, America should do what it can to ensure that the next election is freer and fairer than the last. Since the United States has promised at least \$5 billion a year in future aid (for half a decade or more) and is considering spending \$10 billion a year or more on a post-2014 military presence, Americans have a stake in the electoral process and outcome. The aid figures are based in part on the commitments made in Tokyo last summer by Washington and other key capitals, as well as the plan to keep Afghan security forces around their current level of 352,000 personnel through 2018 or so at an annual cost of about \$5 billion in total — expensive, to be sure, but roughly half the annual costs the United States has been incurring to build the force in recent years, and only about 5 percent the pace of recent American military expenditures.

If Afghans fail to secure the election, hold a fraudulent election or elect a corrupt leader, the odds of the U.S. Congress providing the expected aid are slim. This is also the case for other countries. Washington should, therefore, voice its views now rather than simply cut off aid later if the election goes badly (or if the election is canceled or overturned by a coup — unlikely but not unthinkable outcomes that the United States also needs to contemplate).

As Afghans remember, the Soviet-installed government of Mohammad Najibullah fell not when the Soviet Union initially left Afghanistan in 1989 but when Moscow withdrew its advisers and cut off the money three years later. When the Taliban overran Kabul in 1996, Najibullah was tortured and murdered. All too aware of this history, Afghan reformers, opposition politicians and members of civil society are asking Americans and others to help them make their election a success.

No one has yet officially announced a candidacy for next year's election, but many names are being floated. They include current or former chiefs of staff to the president, Karzai's brother Qayum, Minister of Education Ghulam Farooq Wardak, Minister of Finance Omar Zakhilwel, Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul, former Foreign Minister and presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah and former Minister of Interior Haneef Atmar. These names are all Pashtun, but any plausible candidate would likely announce a multiethnic team, starting with his two vice presidents, before the actual vote.

Indeed, there is a good deal of talk now in Kabul and other places about the desirability of finding a "consensus" candidate or slate. The idea is to use Afghanistan's consultative traditions to avoid a divisive election while the country's democracy is still so fragile. This is a reasonable and even appealing idea in

theory. But the devil will be in the details of the consensus candidate — or, perhaps more accurately, the consensus slate of candidates for various jobs within a new government.

With this in mind, the United States and the international community can help by focusing on a few goals:

First, we should remind Afghans that Americans and others will exercise their own sovereign rights to determine future aid levels once Afghanistan exercises its sovereign right to choose a new leader. The quality of the election process and the quality of the new president's leadership will directly affect international donor decisions on aid. This is just common sense, not a threat.

Second, the international community should help ensure the independence and integrity of the Afghan watchdog groups charged with overseeing the electoral process. For all the criticism of past Afghan elections, it was these Afghan groups — the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission — that uncovered the fraud and threw out the bad ballots in 2009 and 2010. Whether or not they include foreigners, future appointees to the commissions should be selected with the input of parliament, and President Karzai should not be able to dismiss them once appointed. This issue is more important than many others being debated in Kabul, including redoing voter registration and issuing new voter cards.

Third, the international community should watch carefully how the election campaigns play out starting later this year. Afghan state media need to give reasonable time to all candidates, including the opposition. Vote-buying and voter intimidation need to be deterred and prevented through timely investigations of allegations. The electoral commissions will do the investigating, but the international community must stand behind them. To that end the principal role of ISAF during the election will be to enable and assist the ANSF to take the lead in securing the electoral process, by not only fighting to spoil and disrupt potential Taliban interference in the election, but also helping the ANSF secure the balloting itself as Afghan citizens go to the polls.

Fourth, the international community should give technical, moral and if necessary financial support to fledgling Afghan political parties — provided they have inclusive, multiethnic memberships and platforms and promise to eschew violence. The United States and others should encourage the Afghans to develop platforms based on ideas rather than personalities or patronage networks alone.

Fifth, when U.S. officials visit Afghanistan, they should meet not only with members of the executive branch but also with a broad range of Afghan politicians and civil-society members, particularly next-generation representatives, who are the real hope for the country's future.

American passivity in the coming Afghan elections could be just as counterproductive as certain aspects of perceived American assertiveness were last time around. The verdict on the war in Afghanistan may be settled less on the country's battlefields than at its polling stations next spring.

2015 and Beyond

With his decision to reduce U.S. forces in Afghanistan by half between February 2013 and February 2014, President Obama answered most remaining questions about American military strength in Afghanistan through the end of the ISAF mission in 2014. Most of the planned reductions from the current strength of some 66,000 American troops to 34,000 will occur this fall and winter. After that, the force levels will probably hold relatively steady through the Afghan elections in April and perhaps a bit longer, before the drawdown to the "Enduring Force" begins in late summer or fall of next year. Already, the U.S. force presence is focused on supporting the ANSF — American brigade combat teams and Marine regiments have been replaced now by security force assistance brigades, which essentially oversee, support and help enable the work of individual small-unit security force assistance teams.

But there are still a number of critical questions to be worked through, some military and others political. Specifically:

- *What will the Enduring Force do and how large should it be in 2015 and beyond?*
- *Should the United States move straight to the Enduring Force, or have a somewhat larger "bridging force" for two to three years after 2014?*
- *How many allied forces are needed? What is politically realistic in various foreign capitals, especially in Europe?*
- *Should the ANSF be sustained at the level of 352,000 troops beyond the beginning of the currently planned drawdown at the end of 2015? Say, to 2018 or 2020?*
- *What should come first, a clear U.S. commitment to a given Enduring Force (premised on reasonable Afghan elections and governance), or a deal on legal immunity for American troops through the Bilateral Security Accord?*

On the last point, I favor stating the rough contours of an American force as soon as possible. Actual deployment of any such force would of course be contingent on an acceptable immunity/status of forces agreement being concluded. But clarifying the U.S. commitment now would make it clear to Afghans that only their own government's reluctance stands in the way of firming up the partnership. Given Afghanistan's historical fear of abandonment, the impact of such a clear American commitment of intent would be both powerful and positive. It would also help persuade NATO allies to firm up their own plans.

This does not mean that the United States should convey impatience to conclude a Bilateral Security Accord on a rushed basis, which would potentially weaken Washington's negotiating position (since some Afghans wrongly believe that the United States desperately wants bases on their nation's territory for broader regional purposes in multiple directions). But there is no need to be ambiguous about something that would clearly serve American national security interests if Afghans do their part, too.

As for what the Enduring Force package should include, the United States needs several things as a matter of prudence. First, there should be enough force to advise and assist the ANSF effectively, including geographic distribution to cover the ANA corps in Kabul and the "four corners" of the country, and capacity to get below the Afghan Corps level with mobile teams if necessary, to support Afghan brigades in pre-operational preparations, and should problems develop here or there. Second, in the country's north and west in particular, there should be enough enablers to keep U.S. allies in the game, as their logistics capabilities are not adequate to sustain small forces without modest U.S. help. (Germany and Italy seem ready to step up with their contributions, for example, but need assurance of certain U.S. support.) Third, the United States needs to maintain some counterterrorism capabilities in country, for strikes within Afghanistan or in some cases along the border. Finally, for two to three years after 2014, the United States may need an additional force package of several thousand personnel to help the Afghans finish building their air force, their special operations forces and certain other enablers in medical realms, in counter-IED capability and in intelligence collection. This might be viewed as an additional but temporary bridging force, above and beyond the Enduring Force.

To achieve this, the United States should deploy an Enduring Force sized and shaped for these tasks after 2014. It is not my purpose to recommend a specific figure here, and in fact a band of numbers is probably acceptable, as suggested by some of the parameters staked out in the recent public debate on this subject — though greater risk would be associated with smaller force sizes. With clear U.S. commitments, allies would likely contribute an additional 3,000 to 5,000 uniformed personnel themselves.

Despite the near-term challenges in realms ranging from security to corruption to narcotics to difficult neighbors, I remain fundamentally optimistic about Afghanistan's mid- to long-term future. My greatest cause for hope is the next generation. Youth make up 60 percent of Afghanistan's population, and they are being educated in unprecedented numbers. Some 180,000 students are in university this year, with nearly 10 million overall in school. Beyond the numbers, there is the passion, the commitment, the patriotism and the resilience that distinguishes this community of remarkable individuals.

In Afghanistan, many of these next-generation leaders have formed a "1400 group," based on the Afghan Islamic calendar (it is now 1392, so 1400 is roughly the time when this new generation will begin to step up to run the nation). They include individuals who left Afghanistan during the wars of the last 30 years, as

well as some who stayed; they include activists and members of civil society, as well as professionals and technocrats; they include Pashtuns and Tajiks and Hazaras and Uzbeks and others, though all tend to see themselves first and foremost as Afghans.

Most encouraging, perhaps, is the growing role of women in Afghan society. Girls make up more than 40 percent of this new generation of students, and women are an increasingly important voice speaking on behalf of minority rights, countering corruption and embracing the rule of law. Experience in other post-conflict societies suggests that countries able to assimilate women into the mainstream of society were far better able to transition into developing societies. Without the Afghan women playing a major role in the future of Afghanistan, I would not be optimistic that real reform can occur in this traditional society.

Despite its promise, one cannot forget, of course, that Afghanistan will remain one of the poorest, least developed and most corrupt countries in the world for years to come. But the United States and its partners, which have invested and sacrificed so much, have a chance to ensure that the land of the Hindu Kush does not return to being a safe haven for international terrorists and that it stays on the path toward greater stability, as well as human and economic development. Compared to what the international community has collectively invested already -- in blood and in treasure -- the costs associated with this future effort to lock in gains seem a wise investment.

Biography

Michele Flournoy **Co-Chair of the Board of Directors, Center for a New American Security**

Michèle Flournoy is Co-Chair of the Board of Directors of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and a senior adviser at the Boston Consulting Group. She served as the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from February 2009 to February 2012. She was the principal adviser to the Secretary of Defense in the formulation of national security and defense policy, oversight of military plans and operations, and in National Security Council deliberations. She led the development of DoD's new Strategic Guidance and represented the Department in dozens of foreign engagements, in the media and before Congress.

Prior to confirmation, Ms. Flournoy co-led President Obama's transition team at DoD.

In January 2007, Ms. Flournoy co-founded CNAS, a non-partisan think tank dedicated to developing strong pragmatic and principled national security policies. She served as CNAS' President until 2009.

Previously, she was senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for several years and, prior to that, a distinguished research professor at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University (NDU).

In the mid-1990s, she served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Threat Reduction and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy.

Ms. Flournoy has received several awards from the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. She is a member of the Defense Policy Board, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Aspen Strategy Group.

Ms. Flournoy earned a bachelor's degree in social studies from Harvard University and a master's degree in international relations from Balliol College, Oxford University, where she was a Newton-Tatum scholar.