



U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan on the Eve of National Elections

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished Members of the Committee, I appreciate this opportunity to discuss with you today our efforts to help the nation of Afghanistan become a secure, thriving democracy. Indeed, this Committee has been instrumental in the success we have seen to date, so I also appreciate this opportunity to thank you for all of your support, including the Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002.

Three years ago, the United States embarked on a campaign in Afghanistan to defend our country. Today, our goal remains to defeat terrorism, and specifically to deny terrorists any safe haven in Afghanistan. We have seen many victories in this campaign, but I believe all Americans understand that the key to long-term success is to help Afghanistan become a stable country. Indeed, the international community stands with the people of Afghanistan in this noble endeavor. In turn, the Afghan people and their government have welcomed the support of the United States and the international community.

The elements of lasting stability in Afghanistan are to elect a sovereign government, improve the security situation, and reconstruct a nation wrecked by a quarter-century of war and tyranny. As we pursue these objectives, the outcome we want to see is a self-governing Afghanistan, where all the people, men and women alike, enjoy human rights and freedom of conscience. We also want to maintain our partnership in the global war on terrorism.

In the quest for stability, elections are the most immediate challenge. In ten days, Afghanistan will hold Presidential elections, followed by Parliamentary and local elections next spring. Mr. Chairman, you expressed some concerns about the elections to the Department of State's then Coordinator for Afghanistan, Ambassador Bill Taylor, in a hearing four months ago. At the time, nobody was sure of the ultimate response to your questions. Today, however, I am able to offer you some encouraging answers.

Mr. Chairman, you asked whether registered voters would be representative of the Afghan population as a whole. By and large, the answer is yes. I am pleased to report that more than ten million Afghans have registered to vote – far more than the Afghan Government and the international community anticipated. More than 40 percent of those who have registered are women – a percentage considerably greater than we expected. Overall, voter registration in all but two provinces has exceeded 68 percent of the estimated voter-age population, and is much higher in some parts of the country. Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan will also have the opportunity to vote. We believe that the results of the October 9th election will indeed represent the will of a broad cross-section of the population.

Four months ago, Mr. Chairman, you also asked whether security issues would derail the election. Certainly, we know that the Taliban and other insurgents will continue to try to disrupt the process, perhaps even by attempting a large-scale attack on Election Day itself. We are prepared for that possibility: forces from 41 countries, plus the Afghan National Army and police, will be on the ground, ready to defend the integrity of the election process and the right of the Afghan people to vote.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, you asked whether the regional warlords who control their own militias would hijack the election to consolidate their own hold on power. Here, I think, we have seen one of the most encouraging signs of progress in the past couple of months. Showing political courage and determination, President Karzai has succeeded in reducing the influence of several of the most prominent militia leaders. Some have even agreed to join the national government or opted to run for political office themselves, becoming part of the political process. Some have also acquiesced to putting their militias under the command of officers in the Afghan National Army. It may well be that these factional leaders are starting to accept that their future lies within the framework of the Afghan constitution.

Afghan and United Nations election managers tell us that vote counting will last for several weeks. If no candidate wins a majority, there will be a run-off two weeks after the results of the first round are officially announced. Election workers and security forces will be ready to gear up again if a run-off is necessary. We believe that the result will command respect from the Afghan people and the international community. A successful Presidential election will be the first step in developing a tradition of democratic elections in Afghanistan, a tradition that can carry over into next spring to make Parliamentary and local elections a success, as well.

This is, of course, very encouraging, but even a democratically-elected government will need a better security situation in order to govern successfully. For the time being, that will mean ongoing international assistance. Operation Enduring Freedom, with 20 countries contributing soldiers, continues the fight against the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other insurgent elements. Thirty-six countries have contributed troops to the International Security Assistance Force, which is under the control of NATO. Seventeen Provincial Reconstruction Teams – 13 under U.S. management – also provide security across the country.

At the same time, the United States is helping Afghanistan to develop the security forces the country will need to defend itself. This security assistance is multi-faceted: we have already trained more than 25,000 members of the national police force, as well as some 11,800 soldiers of the Afghan National Army, who are now deployed in 16 provinces. These troops have succeeded in stemming recent violence in western Afghanistan and elsewhere. Finally, the process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration is progressing, albeit slowly, with all heavy weapons now cantoned in Kabul.

As you are all aware, terrorist elements are not the only security challenge the fledgling government will face. There is also a serious and growing narcotics trafficking problem. One year ago, this was considered a secondary concern, but today, President Karzai and other Afghan officials say that the drug trade and the associated corruption may be the most significant threats to a secure and democratic Afghanistan. Indeed, there is a direct link between drug trafficking and the militants and recalcitrant warlords who seek to undermine the central government.

We know from past experience in other parts of the world what it will take to run a successful counternarcotics campaign in Afghanistan. First, the government must recognize and acknowledge the extent of the problem. Then the government needs the political will, the resources, and the programs to deal with the problem. As I noted, there is a consensus among a cross-section of Afghan officials that drug trafficking presents perhaps the most serious challenge to the state. We believe that regardless of the outcome of the October 9th elections, there will be a firm commitment to meeting this challenge head on. As for the resources, international donors, chiefly the United Kingdom and United States, are providing expertise and financial aid needed to thwart this problem. Finally, we are coordinating closely with our partners in the British and Afghan governments to develop a detailed counternarcotics plan. The plan is to build on and add to what have been modest efforts to date, by improving eradication, interdiction, law enforcement, public information, and the development of alternative livelihoods.

Drug trafficking was not the only criminal enterprise that flourished in the absence of the rule of law in Afghanistan; a lucrative trade in women and children also developed. People are trafficked from and through Afghanistan to Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia for begging, labor and prostitution, as well as internally for forced marriage, labor, and sexual exploitation. To counter this deplorable practice, the Government of Afghanistan is now taking important steps, including providing victim assistance and calling for criminal prosecution of the perpetrators. Given the limited resources available to Afghanistan, the nascent state of the central government, and the multitude of other challenges that the government faces, these anti-trafficking efforts are commendable. The United States directly supports those efforts through financial and technical assistance, including training of police and border security forces.

Shutting down the criminal networks that sustain trafficking in people and drugs is crucial to the security of Afghanistan. At the same time, long-term stability will depend on a healthy economy as much as it will depend on security. To that end, the United States is leading an international effort to rebuild Afghanistan piece-by-piece, as Members of this Committee are well aware. We are constructing highways and provincial roads; we have, for example, completed reconstruction and the first layer of pavement on more than 240 miles of the Kabul-to-Kandahar highway. Hundreds of schools and clinics are under construction nationwide, as well as several industrial parks. We have distributed 13 million textbooks. We are sending advisors to train judges and lawyers. We are providing food, water, medicine, and power, and we are revitalizing government institutions.

The United States has funded much of the reconstruction effort, providing \$4.5 billion to date. Thirty-five other countries, the EU, and other international organizations, have pledged more than \$10 billion. In addition, we continue to seek further assistance from our friends around the world.

Mr. Chairman, Afghanistan has come a long way in the short space of one year. Moreover, it is entirely reasonable to expect that a year from now, the Afghan people will have a duly-elected president, a parliament made up of local and national representatives, and the institutions they need to defend and protect their sovereignty and integrity against religious extremism, terrorism, and narcotics trafficking. From my travels to the region, I can tell you that the Afghan people and government appreciate our support in reaching that vision, and they also value close and lasting ties to the United States. In turn, the United States has made a long-term commitment to Afghanistan.

Mr. Chairman, we thank Congress for its past support for Afghanistan. With your future support, we believe this is a strategic partnership that will continue to benefit both our nations for many years to come.

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