



Nomination to be Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Ambassador Ronald Neumann

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Mr. Chairman, Senator Biden, distinguished Members of the Committee, as the President's nominee to be Ambassador to Afghanistan, I look forward to reviewing the Administration's priorities for Afghanistan and to hearing your views on how we should move forward to advance our common national objectives in that important country.

Mr. Chairman, allow me to begin by thanking the President and Secretary Rice for the privilege I now have of sitting before you as the nominee for this position. It is a great honor because I know that much rests on our success in Afghanistan. I would also like to recognize Ambassador Khalilzad for his remarkable achievements in Afghanistan over the last 18 months.

Mr. Chairman, let me also thank this committee and the Congress as a whole for its sustained support for Afghanistan over the last four years, both in terms of visits and resources. Congress has appropriated over \$9 billion since 2002 for Afghanistan – and we have much to show for that investment.

Lessons from Baghdad

If confirmed, I would take to Kabul the benefit of 16 months' experience in Iraq, where I had the privilege of serving this year as Political-Military Counselor to Ambassador Negroponte. Clearly the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan are very different, with vastly different histories, cultures and economies, but in both countries we have seen courageous and bold steps toward democracy that we could not have imagined five years ago, and that would not have happened without the courage and dedication of American military and civilian personnel.

One lesson that I would take with me from Baghdad is the decisive importance of working closely with local leaders, of consulting with them, listening to them and empowering them. If confirmed, I would look forward to working closely with President Karzai, a visionary leader with a clear mandate to lead his people toward a brighter future as a constitutional democracy. I would also take with me a deep appreciation for the sacrifices and skills of the American men and women serving on the front lines – both in and out of uniform – and I would make it a priority to ensure that they receive all the support they deserve. Thirdly, I would take with me an appreciation of the importance of teamwork – with military and civilian branches of the Administration working seamlessly and in regular consultation with the Congress. Above all, I pledge that I will do all in my power to keep the people in my charge safe and their morale high.

Allow me to review our key accomplishments and challenges in Afghanistan.

Accomplishments

Afghanistan is in the midst of a historic transition. In just over three years, we have seen extraordinary progress on the political, security and reconstruction fronts.

Opponents who previously settled scores through violent confrontation faced off at the ballot box in October 2004 for presidential elections, an unprecedented success for a country torn apart from three decades of conflict. Karzai's subsequent appointment of a qualified, multi-ethnic cabinet further demonstrated that Afghanistan is entering a new time with possibilities for stability and democracy that can ensure a better future for the people of this long suffering land.

Afghanistan's presidential elections followed on the adoption in January 2004 of one of the most enlightened constitutions in the Islamic world, a remarkable accomplishment considering that four years ago the Taliban ruled Afghanistan with an Islamic absolutism that denied fundamental human rights, even denying women the right to work or go to school.

We have also seen real progress on the security front as major militias have surrendered their heavy weapons and warlords have had to choose between supporting the new Afghan government on the one hand and becoming marginalized on the other. Despite continuing attacks, there are also unmistakable signs that the Taliban insurgency is weakening, with many mid-level Taliban leaders, as well as low-level fighters, taking advantage of an amnesty program that allows them to lay down their weapons and rejoin Afghan society if they have not committed any serious crimes. Meanwhile, the Afghan National Army is steadily coalescing into a national defense force and an important tool for President Karzai in his efforts to extend the reach of the national government and bring stability to the provinces. At about 24,000 strong, the ANA is an ethnically mixed force from all areas of Afghanistan. The force has successfully deployed to quell factional fighting in the north and the west, and has won praise for its capabilities fighting alongside Operation Enduring Freedom troops against insurgents in the east and the south.

Other Afghan forces also contribute to security. National, border, and highway police, over 41,000 so far, are being trained by the U.S. and Germany to provide day-to-day security throughout the provinces and in Kabul.

U.S. and international forces are also, of course, a key element of the security equation. With multiple countries operating in the U.S.-led coalition and many others in the International Security Assistance Force under NATO command, security operations have been a model of international coordination. NATO's command of ISAF is the Alliance's first operation beyond Europe, and over the last year we have seen its capabilities grow and its mandate expand beyond Kabul into northern and western Afghanistan.

On the economic front, Afghanistan has made significant progress in the last four years. The creation of a new, stable currency in 2002 was an impressive achievement and government policies have helped lay the groundwork for an economic expansion that has seen GNP increase by over 50 percent over the last three years. Reconstruction efforts are also showing results. The drive from Kabul to Kandahar now takes five hours instead of 16, thanks to a fully paved highway that links Afghanistan's two largest cities. Work is ongoing on the Kandahar to Herat portion of the road and on some 1000 kilometers of secondary roads. In the south, the Kajaki Hydroelectric Plant, which provides electricity to Kandahar, is being overhauled and throughout the country hundreds of schools and health clinics have been constructed and rehabilitated. School attendance for girls and boys increased to a record four million last year.

In sum, a great deal has been accomplished. If confirmed I will arrive in an Afghanistan that is undergoing a transformation brought on by the vision and hard work of the Afghan people and by the generosity and dedication of the United States and our friends in the international community. But significant threats and challenges remain. The two principal threats are the lack of security and the growing narcotics menace. Longer-term issues of a very poor country driven by years of strife remain.

Threats and Challenges

On the security front, illegal armed groups, not recognized by the Ministry of Defense, still need to be disarmed. Taliban elements, particularly in the South and Southeast regions, continue to mount sporadic but nevertheless damaging attacks, deterring NGO and UN reconstruction efforts in the affected provinces. We have seen an upsurge in security incidents in recent weeks, including the assassination of a pro-government religious leader in Kandahar, a subsequent attack on a mosque that killed 20 Afghans and an attack on election workers. With parliamentary elections on the horizon, the Taliban are trying to disrupt progress toward stability and participatory

government and return Afghanistan to a past when it served as the global headquarters of hate and oppression. We must not and will not allow that to happen, and addressing these security challenges will be a central priority for me if I am confirmed, as I know they are already for President Karzai. Success will require sustained military pressure, continued strengthening of Afghan security capabilities and – just as important – the opportunity for amnesty and the creation of democratic political sphere where every Afghan will have an opportunity to make his or her case without recourse to weapons.

Poppy cultivation also continues at a dangerous level – dangerous for the drugs it unleashes on the world and dangerous, because the record shows that the combination of weapons, illicit wealth and lawlessness associated with narcotics production and trafficking is corrosive to stability and good government, with implications for all we have achieved to date in Afghanistan. I am convinced that there are no quick fixes or silver bullets here. Ending the narcotics menace will take time and it will take a multi-track approach that includes not only eradication and interdiction but also alternative livelihoods for farmers, law enforcement and effective public education efforts with the Afghan people.

The principle near-term challenge is the need to prepare for national assembly and provincial elections in September, ensuring that they meet the high standards of the Afghan people. I am informed that preparations are on track and that thousands of candidates and scores of political parties have registered, but logistics and security will require ongoing and intensive international support. I would stress that the challenge will not end after election day. It is essential that these representative bodies develop into genuine expressions of the popular will, working constructively with the President to fashion a better future for Afghanistan. Here, too, continued U.S. and international assistance will be essential.

Over the medium and longer term, the challenge will be to continue our reconstruction and development efforts and to ensure that our friends in the international community remain fully engaged as well. Afghanistan remains a desperately poor country with some of the world's worst health and education indicators. If we hope to have a meaningful and lasting impact in Afghanistan, it will take a sustained commitment. A central concern will be the need to build Afghan capacity at all levels and in all sectors. After decades of war and destruction, there are simply not enough educated, trained and experienced Afghans to address its needs, either in the public or private sector.

A Long-Term Commitment

As the Bonn Process draws to a close with the Parliamentary elections, Afghan leaders have been urging the international community to make a long-term commitment to Afghanistan and to offer assurances that our engagement will continue. The United States has responded to this request, in part, by working with Afghan leaders to define a long-term Strategic Partnership. These discussions were finalized during President Karzai's visit to Washington last month with the signing of a Joint Declaration for a U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership that assures continuity along the main avenues of our cooperation to date, specifically in the areas of security, economic development and democracy and governance. For its part, Afghanistan pledged its continued support in the war on terror and its commitment to democratic principles.

This partnership will benefit not only Afghanistan and the United States, but also the region as a whole. It is our hope – a hope that is shared by Afghan leaders – that it will contribute to progress in establishing Afghanistan as a secure, democratic partner for other countries in the region.

Conclusion

I expect the challenges ahead – including some that we have not foreseen – are at least as great as what we have faced to date. But I am optimistic about Afghanistan's future. It has already made a historic transition, and I am convinced that the Afghan people will see it through and that Afghanistan will achieve its appropriate place as a stable, prospering, and respected member of the community of nations.

Afghanistan has a long and proud history that is well known to its people and that they now have a chance to reclaim. The city of Kandahar is named for Alexander the Great and some of its cities were once the leading cities of Asia. With peace and stability, Afghans know that they are capable of great things. As they embrace the universal ideals of freedom, representative government, individual rights, and the rule of law they are laying the groundwork for a very bright future.

It is in our vital national interest to ensure that the Afghan people succeed. Afghanistan must never again serve as a terrorist safe-haven.

If confirmed, I will do my part to ensure that they do succeed, working with the Afghan leadership, with my colleagues in uniform, with my diplomatic team in Kabul and with you.

Finally, on a personal note, it was on a visit to Afghanistan in 1967 that my wife and I began a life-long interest in the Muslim world and culture. We traveled extensively in Afghanistan, by car, jeep, horse and yak. My brother Gregory finished high school there and my parents were deeply involved in the country during their long tour in Kabul and for many years thereafter until their deaths. I remember the country and the people with delight. I look forward to resuming a relationship that is so much a part of my own family history and guiding a post once led by my father.

Thank you.

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