

Written Testimony to the House Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

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The overall situation in Afghanistan is serious and deteriorating. Since 2001, there has been significant progress in some areas of health, education and rural development. However, much of the government is corrupt and ineffective, and the rule of law weak or non-existent. The Taliban and associated groups, including criminal elements, have achieved considerable success, and now have varying degrees of influence in rural areas in up to half of the country.

The reasons for this are varied and complex. Although widely welcomed by Afghans, the initial international approach was manifestly insufficient, given the scale of devastation caused by over two decades of war, and, being founded on cooption, it compounded the authority warlords and local strongmen.

International aid has been fragmented, supply-driven and often inappropriate, rather than responding to Afghan needs and preferences. It has tended to focus on physical and technical outcomes rather than the crucial task of promoting Afghan capacity and ownership. It suffers from a lack of prioritization, and the neglect of small-scale, community-based projects that can have significant success. It is inefficient, being reliant on costly contractors and consultants, and is hampered by excessive risk aversion, with most expatriates ensconced in fortified compounds and armored vehicles. Even in critical areas such as police reform, international efforts have been under-resourced and poorly coordinated.

International military forces have prioritized eliminating insurgents and winning "hearts and minds" through assistance-related projects. Both are largely futile. Consider the context: the history of external interference; Afghans' proud independence, conservatism and well-justified mistrust of foreign forces; and the large numbers of illiterate, unemployed young men, with families to feed. Consider that parts of the international military are seen as using excessive force, through airstrikes and raids, as well as arbitrary detentions, while propping up a regime that is perceived as corrupt and unjust. Consider, also, insurgent propaganda and their systematic use of terror and intimidation against Afghan community leaders (two Afghans are executed by insurgents every three days).

In these circumstances, while many Afghans in the south and south-east may not be enthusiasts for the Taliban, there is no credible alternative. When the insurgents, with sanctuary and support inside Pakistan, appear to be winning, it is not surprising that

for reasons of personal safety Afghans are reluctant to oppose them. The focus of PRTs on militarized development is a contradiction in terms, rarely achieves the level of ownership necessary to meet core development objectives, and diverts funding and efforts away from local, civilian institutions and organizations. Moreover, in conflict areas it is precisely the heavy involvement of the military in civilian affairs that substantiates and energizes the Taliban's largely Islamist, nationalist campaign, framed as resistance to foreign military interference. Notably, it would appear that in none of the twenty-six provinces in which PRTs are located – some for over six years – has there been a diminution in insurgent activity.

Thus, the military and Afghan government are apparently caught in a mutually detrimental relationship, in which both sides lose credibility: the military by association with a corrupt and unjust government; the government, by association with a foreign military, portrayed as an aggressor.

General McChrystal is right that government legitimacy, and the population's security are critical. However, international forces have a limited capacity to address these issues. Building Afghan security forces is a long-term endeavor, and prioritizing quantity over quality could prove counter-productive. Moreover, his proposal for a more integrated approach, in which international forces increasingly engage with Afghan civilians, plays into insurgent hands, attributes unrealistic capabilities to soldiers, and does not address the core issues. In fact, a clearer civil-military delineation is required with more effective political efforts, which lie outside the core competency of the military.

The insurgency is essentially an Afghan political problem. It is not in itself the disease, but the symptom of a deeper disorder, namely a government that is perceived as illegitimate, self-serving and has excluded certain groups and communities based on tribal or other affiliations. Thus, it demands a political response that is indigenous, inclusive, and addresses injustices and legitimate grievances. It should involve Afghan society at large, and include longer-term efforts to promote truth and reconciliation, while ensuring respect for justice and fundamental rights.

America and the international community can do better to help bring about the conditions in which positive political change can take place.

First, we should acknowledge the limits of outsiders in effecting change and focus on empowering Afghans to address their challenges. The principal goal, at national and local level, should not be to solve problems for Afghans but to use our comparative advantages to build their capacity to solve problems. In other words, we should focus on building capabilities, and robust institutions, not just delivering results.

Second, empathize with Afghans, and adapt accordingly. Reduce foreign military involvement in civilian affairs, and prioritize interventions that reflect Afghan interests and preferences, such as in security, jobs, health or rural development. Over-ambition, excessive use of force, or policies that reinforce corruption and impunity, are invariably counter-productive.

Third, after determining what is possible and appropriate, develop strategies that are fit for purpose, and devote sufficient resources and political will for their accomplishment. Half-measures, whether in police reform, governance or development, are likely to do more harm than good. Recognize the need for a regional political strategy, to achieve the constructive engagement of neighboring states.

Fourth, address obvious flaws in aid delivery: reduce reliance on international contractors and consultants, in favor of Afghan institutions and organizations; reduce the use of foreign parallel mechanisms such as PRTs that diminish the accountability of Afghan leaders to the people. Ensure cooperation, transparency, and rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

Fifth, don't expect swift results: progress in key areas is possible but it will be incremental. It requires realism combined with a long-term commitment and genuine political resolve.