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Winning in Afghanistan: Challenges and Response

**Testimony to the House Committee on
Foreign Affairs**

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February 15, 2007

No one can return from visiting the front in Afghanistan without realizing there is a very real risk that the US and NATO could lose their war with Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the other Islamist movements fighting the Afghan government. We are still winning tactically, but we may well be losing strategically.

The facts on the ground are not simple. The appendix to this briefing lays out these facts in far more detail, along with evidence of critical shifts in Afghan public opinion that show the war is still winnable, but there has been a serious deterioration in the situation. It also shows there are no simple solutions that can work. Winning will take more resources, more forces, more patience, and at least 5-10 more years of persistent effort.

The key steps the US and its allies must take, however, are clear, and so is the need for urgency. They involve major changes in strategy, aid, and military levels that require the following efforts:

- Building up Afghan capabilities and fighting corruption requires slow, patient efforts on a national, provincial, and local basis
- Improving the quality of governance, security, and economic development needs priority over politics.
- Accepting the reality that development of effective government and economy will take 5-10 years; that no instant success is possible; and aid plans must be long term plans providing consistently high levels of resources.
- Increasing economic aid at levels 3-4 times the 2006 level on a sustained basis at the national, provincial, and local level.
- Ensuring that security and aid reach ordinary Afghans in rural areas, particularly in South and Northeast.
- Taking a new approach to counter narcotics that emphasizes dealing with high-level traffickers, time, incentives, anti-corruption, and counterinsurgency.
- Raising US and NATO force levels by 10-25% for at least several years.
- Restructuring allied national efforts to create a truly unified and effective NATO effort.
- Providing major additional aid and advisory resources to develop security: Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP).
- Dealing with Pakistan to end its status as “sanctuary,” and contain Iran.

At the same time, the US, its NATO Allies, and Afghans need to remember that action needs to be taken now, not just consistently over time. Action is needed to deal with a 2007 offensive and ongoing Taliban efforts to seize political and economic control of more and more space. Providing aid and forces now is not only essential, it can vastly increase the chance of success and the effectiveness of a given level of effort. Waiting until the US, NATO, and Afghan bureaucracy moves at its normal pace, and deferring key actions into FY2008 is a good way to cut the effectiveness of every action that the US and its allies take.

The Growing Threat

The US and NATO may win tactical battles, but the Taliban and other Islamist forces seem to be starting to win the critical strategic battle for political and economic space. Declassified intelligence made available during my trip showed that major Al Qa'ida, Taliban, Haqqani Network (HQN), and Hezb-e Islami Gulbiddein (HiG) sanctuaries exist in Pakistan and that the areas they operate in within Afghanistan increased by more than four times between 2005 and 2006.

Suicide attacks increase from 18 in the first 11 months of 2005 to 116 in the first 11 months of 2006. Direct fire attacks increased from 1,347 to 3,824, IEDs from 530 to 1,297, and other attacks from 269 to 479. The number of attacks on Afghan forces increased from 713 to 2,892, attacks on coalition forces increased from 919 to 2,496, and attacks on Afghan government officials increased by 2.5 times.

Only the massive use of US precision air power and intelligence assets allowed the US to win tactically in the east, and the British position in the south is so weak that Britain has had to allow a major increase in the Taliban presence to compensate for its military weakness.

The good news is that popular support for the US and NATO is still relatively strong and can be rebuilt. The US and NATO teams in country have created core programs for strengthening governance, Afghan military and police forces, and the Afghan economy that can succeed if they only get the resources required. The present aid efforts are largely sound and well managed, and can make effective use of immediate increases in funding.

The Need for a New US, Allied, and Afghan Approach

The challenges in Afghanistan are very different than those in Iraq. The threat is still weak, and the key problems are resources, patience, and time. The Afghan government will take years to become effective, reduce corruption to acceptable levels, and replace a narcotics-based economy. As one Afghan Deputy Minister put it to me during my trip, "Now we are all corrupt. Until we change and serve the people, we will fail."

Afghanistan is going to need large amounts of military and economic aid, much of it managed from the outside in ways that ensure it actually gets to Afghans throughout the country -- particularly in the local areas where the threat is greatest. Our present nation building effort is badly under resourced, and does not reach more ordinary Afghans, over 70% of which live in rural areas that currently receive minimal or no aid.

The maps of actual and proposed projects that aid teams show a visitor make it all too clear that the progress to date is real, but only covers a small part of the country. Even a short visit to some of the districts in the southeast makes it clear that most local districts have not seen progress. Drought adds to the problem in many areas and much of the old irrigation system has visibly collapsed. Roads are little more than paths, the government

cannot offer hope, and local officials and police cannot compete with drug loans and income.

The US has grossly underfunded such economic aid efforts and left far too much of the country without visible aid activity. Country team plans call for a \$2.3 billion program, but unless at least \$1.1 billion comes immediately as an FY 2007 supplemental, the aid program will lag far beyond need during next year. Moreover, a well-planned and funded five-year plan is needed to provide continuity and effectiveness. America's NATO allies are falling far short of providing what is needed, particularly France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Major increases in aid are needed from each NATO ally. The US is carrying far too much of the burden and cannot be everywhere. Every NATO country needs to make a major local aid effort.

This means the US needs to make major increases in its economic aid, as do our NATO allies. They need to make such increases immediately if new projects and meaningful actions are to begin in the field by the end of the winter season, and as new Taliban and Islamist offensives begin in 2007.

It also means that the US and Europe need to understand that winning the war is what counts, and not drug eradication. Hollow, if not vacuous, political rhetoric and exhortations about making quick, serious cuts in drug output simply plays into the hands of the Taliban, criminals, and ex-warlords. The priority is to meet Afghan needs, not carry on with yet another fruitless war on drugs.

The good news is that even if the Congress fully funds the aid program that is an essential tool to winning, it will still be cheap by the standards of aid to Iraq. The projects needed are simple and ones Afghans can largely carry out. People need roads and water, and schools and medical services to a lesser degree. They need emergency aid to meet local needs and win hearts and minds.

The Need for More US and Allied Military Forces

There are roughly 33,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan, plus some 12,000 remaining US troops that still operate independently as part of Operation Enduring Freedom and advisors; versus a total of 162,000 Coalition troops in Iraq. Afghanistan, however, has a population of over 31 million versus some 27 million in Iraq, its territory is 50% larger, and its transportation and communications infrastructure is far more primitive. The threat in Iraq has no major sanctuary outside the country; Al Qa'ida, Taliban, Haqqani Network (HQN), and Hezb-e Islami Gulbiddein (HiG) all have de facto sanctuaries in Waziristan in eastern Pakistan.

The present level of US military forces is too weak to do the job in the areas where the US has military responsibility, and current plans to surge elements of the US 10th Mountain Division offer only a temporary solution. The US does not have economy of force, it has inadequacy of force. Competing demands in Iraq have led to a military climate where US forces plan for what they can get and not what they need.

The US needs to adopt a success-oriented strategy, not a resource-limited strategy. The 10th Mountain division has asked for one more infantry brigade. This badly understates need even if Polish forces help the US in the east. The US needs forces strong enough to hold and build as well as win. It needs at least two, and increases in Special Forces as well. These force increases are a tiny by comparison with US forces in Iraq, but they can make all of the difference.

The force contributions of our NATO allies present major resource problems as well. Allied countries need to provide stronger and better-equipped forces. Above all, provide forces that will join the fight and go where they are most needed.

The British fight well but have only 50% to 75% of the forces they need. Canada and the Netherlands are in the fight. The Danes, Estonians, and Romanians have done some fighting. The Poles are coming without adequate equipment but willing to fight. France, Spain, Turkey, Germany, and Italy are not in the fight because of political constraints and rules of engagement. Only French Special Forces have played any role and they depart in January.

The Need to Reform National Contributions to NATO

NATO needs to be able to exercise effective central command and allocate all forces according to NATO's command needs and rules of engagement. It cannot win with politically constrained forces that cannot perform the missions that a truly needed. NATO's current forces would be inadequate even if all of the NATO countries were fully in the fight.

Furthermore, only US, Canadian, British, Danes, Estonians, and Dutch forces are now really in the fight. Key NATO partners like France, Germany, Spain, Turkey and Italy are "stand aside" countries that do not provide fighting forces, except for French Special Forces. Roughly a quarter of NATO's strength uses a political rationale to seize the high moral ground and hide there in safety.

Elsewhere, British weakness in the south has forced a political compromise that has allowed allow a major increase in the Taliban presence. Britain needs substantial additional forces to hold the south, and prevent the slow growth of a Taliban presence that could end in taking Kandahar. Much of Helmand and Kandahar Provinces are already at risk. Canada, the Netherlands, and Romania play an important role in combat, and Poland is coming.

All these forces need heavier equipment and weapons. In fact, Canada is already in the process of being the first country to introduce main battle tanks. US commanders recognize that US troop strength is too weak in the east.

Studies by the International Security Force (ISAF,) the NATO command in Afghanistan, indicate that the total NATO force needs 6 more battalions -- especially another battalion in the south; a rapid expansion of military trainers for the Afghan National Army and

Afghan National Police; and additional troops and specialists in other areas of what NATO calls the Combined Joint Statement of Requirements (CJSOR).

NATO needs integrated operations with common rules of engagement. It needs a true integrated command with suitable continuity of service, and adequate tour lengths. Countries need to provide to provide adequate member country armor, artillery, tactical mobility, and air. More efforts are needed to integrate US advanced IS&R assets into common NATO and Afghan operations. NATO also needs an integrated structure for using advanced US air and IS&R assets in the Combined Air Operation Center (CAOC) in Qatar, and to develop a comprehensive, workable strategy for dealing with battlefield detainees

Dealing with Pakistan

NATO needs to put collective pressure on Pakistan to end the sanctuary it gives to the enemy. It did not address the weakness of the Afghan government and the scale of the problems created by a near to mid term dependence on a narco-economy. It will be years before the central government in Kabul can create an effective presence and services in most local area, particularly those under threat.

The Need to Restructure Efforts to Develop the Afghan Army and Police

The US and NATO have repeated many of the same mistakes in developing effective Afghan army and police forces made in Iraq. The force development effort has rushed unready forces into combat. The manning of key Afghan army battalions is sometimes below 25% and the police units are often unpaid and hollow forces. Corruption and pay problems are still endemic. Equipment and facilities are inadequate. Overall funding has been about 20% of the real-world requirement, and talks with Afghan and NATO officials made it brutally clear that German effort to create a police force was a disaster that wasted years NATO did not have to waste on trying to create a conventional police force rather than the mix of paramilitary and local police forces Afghanistan really needs.

All NATO countries need to make a commitment to provide sustained military and economic aid at the required levels. NATO must also unite to make stronger efforts to create effective military and police forces. The present Afghan army is just beginning to be effective and has major pay, equipment, and morale problems. Some key battalions have less than 25% of authorized strength, and retention is low. Germany wasted years training the wrong kind of police at inadequate levels. Effective police now have to be created virtually from the ground up, and NATO/ISAF aid is needed to build the capacity of the Ministry of Interior and in training, equipping and basing the Afghan National Police.

The good news is that there is now a new realism in the US and NATO effort. The planning, training effort, and much of the necessary base has been built up during the last year. Effective plans exist and NATO staffs and US now exist to help implement them.

The bad news is the same crippling lack of resources that affect every part of the US and NATO efforts affect the development of the Army and police. In one visit to an older

Army battalion, it was all too clear that it had less than a quarter of its authorized manpower, and only one man in five was expected to reenlist when their time came up this fall. A visit to a police unit revealed its men police were supposed to be paid on a quarterly basis, but sometimes were not paid at all. Such police have no choice other than to extort a living. In one case, ethnic tension had led the officer in charge of pay to not even fill out forms because he had been passed over for promotion. Both Afghans and their advisors make it clear that many good leaders and good units are being used up by being rushed into combat and excessive duties without adequate equipment, facilities, and support.

The Narcotics Issue

At the same time, NATO needs to restructure counter narcotics efforts to focus on near term economic development, anti-corruption, and high pay-off law enforcement: eradication phased over time. It needs to broaden its aid efforts to support the government, and help provide education, clinics, and other local services.

Persistence, Patience, and Time

Patience and persistence will be as critical as more troops, resources, and advisors. No matter what the outside world does, political, military, and economic progress will take time. The present central government will be weak and partly ineffective for at least two to three years, and will be incapable of providing the presence and services in the field that Afghan's desperately need and demand.

The past focus on democracy and the political process in Kabul, rather than on the quality of governance, and services, has left many areas angry and open to Taliban and hostile influence and control. Creating new efforts that really work at the national scale, and especially in troubled areas, will take more than a year to begin, much less accomplish.

Paying for victory now, however, will be far cheaper than waiting until a crisis occurs, and far, far cheaper than defeat. Other US and allied failures to honestly address the problems in the field, to be realistic about resource needs, to create effective long term aid and force development plans, and to emphasize governance over services may well have brought defeat in Iraq. The US and its allies cannot afford to lose two wars. If they do not act now, they will.

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