



**Statement before the House Armed Services Committee**

***“THE FORCES SHAPING TRANSITION IN  
AFGHANISTAN: 2014-2016”***

A Statement by:

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**Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,**

If there is any lesson I have learned during the time between Vietnam and the present, it is that we perpetually seek simplicity and good news in wars that are extraordinarily complex, and we spin the facts into some simple justification of what we are doing rather than face the far more challenging mix of problems and risks that actually shape a conflict.

We have been asked to testify today about the third war in my lifetime where we are headed out of a war while denying or understating many of the risks, spinning the facts to justify a rapid departure, and failing to provide any meaningful public debate over the strategic importance of our actions.

Our latest QDR, strategic guidance, and the President's recent West Point speech on strategy virtually ignore the strategic importance of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. Our Transition "plans" make no meaningful public mention of the role of Pakistan – which many see as the real strategic center of gravity in the conflict – or of other outside powers.

To the extent we have a public strategy, it is one that involves less than a year of the minimum level of US advisory effort recommended by key officers like General Mattis, General Allen, and General Dunford. It will throw limited amounts of civil and military aid at Afghanistan without any public plan for shaping the future of Afghan forces and governance. It fails to take into account whether Afghanistan can make the reforms necessary for that funding to be effective, and ignores clear warnings from recent data on the trends in the fighting, governance, and economy that our level of commitment will be too limited, too short, and too lacking in structure to be effective.

We are also acting after we have increasingly reduced the amount of data we make public on the course of the fighting and the state of the Afghan economy, and have spun the data we do provide to support our present political goals. We focus on Afghan forces and the military dimension at the tactical level, and understate or ignore massive uncertainties as to Afghanistan's political unity and capacity to govern. We talk about aid levels that are not based on concrete plans and costs, and we are moving forward at a time when the war lacks the support of the American people, and most polls conducted over the last two years show that the war lacks public support from most of our key ISAF allies. (pp. 26-32 of report)

The war in Afghanistan demonstrates – as do the wars in Vietnam and Iraq – that we actually face three primary threats when we go to war:

- ***The first and most obvious threat is the enemy.*** Although "obvious" is not an accurate word in a war where we have never openly come to grips with the fact that Pakistan has been both a sanctuary for our enemy and maintained ties to key enemy factions throughout the conflict.

- ***The second threat is the mix of weakness and failures in the host country and a lack of commitment from our key allies.***

Every serious counterinsurgency struggle is to some extent the result of a failed state, and becomes an exercise in armed nation building where the military and tactical outcome is only part of a civil-military struggle for popular support.

- ***The third –and in some ways the most important threat – is ourselves.*** It is our unwillingness to face hard facts, objectively assess the strategic reasons for the fighting, the risks involved, and the cost-benefits of what we are doing.

We have done more than simply spin the facts. We have focused on the tactical dimensions of insurgency, rather than the political dimension of what is fundamentally a political form of warfare. We have made no public assessments of the relative size of the areas where insurgent groups control territory, challenge the Afghan government, present a current threat, or have growing influence. We have made no effort to make a net assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of insurgent groups versus the central government and local power brokers.

These are not issues I can adequately address in a short statement, but I have prepared and provided a comprehensive comparative analysis of the overall mix of trends in the fighting and the Transition effort that I request be entered into the record.

I do not expect any Member to have the time to read through the entire document, but even skimming through it reveals the extent to which we have distorted the facts surrounding the fighting, the desperate need for effective Afghan unity and leadership quality of governance, and the state of the Afghan economy and its inability to deal with the shock of transition.

If you do skim through the data, you will see many other risks and issues we choose to deny or ignore. They include the following key challenges to our present course of action:

- ***As an introduction to these comments, it is important to note that ISAF, the State Department, and USAID – as well as many NGOs and think tanks – fail to verify the data they use,*** cherry pick favorable statistics or distort the statistic baseline they use, and fail to make explicit assessments of the gross uncertainties and problems in the timeliness of the data they use. These affect data on patterns of combat, GNP growth, impacts of aid, health statistics, education, women's rights etc. Ignoring uncertainty and competing data is lying by omission and fundamentally dishonest and incompetent.
- ***ISAF and SIGAR data show that the history of military and civil aid efforts and funding has been erratic, has not been tied to clear spending plans or***

*measures of effectiveness, and the current plans are based on vague funding goals unrelated to clear assessments of costs and needs (pp. 32-40).*

- ***US and ISAF data show that the “surge” in Afghanistan after 2009 achieved some real tactical benefits in the south, but had no overall impact on the intensity of the fighting and none of the major impact of the surge in Iraq (pp. 46-49).*** These are key reasons why ISAF stopped reporting mistaken estimates of Enemy Initiated Attacks and has virtually stopped public reporting on the metrics of the war.
- ***UN data on the trends in casualties show that ISAF and DoD reporting on the course of the fighting spins away the growing intensity of the conflict, and its steady expansion into new areas in Afghanistan (pp. 51 to 61).*** as well as focuses exclusively on the tactical dimension rather than expanding areas of insurgent influence and the wide range of areas where the Afghan government and Afghan forces are not present, nor effective, or are abusive and corrupt.
- ***The data on the development of the ANSF warns that Transition is being rushed forward far too rapidly (pp. 62 to 104).*** There are still real prospects for success if the election produces real Afghan leadership and political unity, but not if a major advisory and enabling presence is not maintained on a “conditions-based” agreement, rather than slashed down to an arbitrary deadline.
- ***Critical problems and uncertainties remain in the development of the MoD and regular military forces, including critical problems with manpower retention, corruption, ethnic differences, and coping with the shift from “force generation” advisory efforts and metrics to acting as a warfighting force where effectiveness is measured in terms of actual combat behavior and not training, manning, and material assets (pp. 105-120).*** The inability to handle this transition without advisors and enablers down to the major combat unit level crippled the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and led Iraqi units to begin to fall apart within months of the departure of US advisors.
- ***The police remain highly corrupt, unsuited for counterinsurgency, and lack effective local governance and courts, detention facilities, and other elements of effective rule of law (pp. 122-131 and 137-141).*** They still make up more than 40% of the total ANSF (p. 98). The end result is that the actual total fighting forces is very small compared to the territory that needs to be defended, and the threat forces can cherry pick the weaker elements of the ANSF and police once ISAF forces are gone. Moreover, the combined corruption of Afghan government and police forces has significantly alienated the local population and opened it up to Taliban and insurgent influence.
- ***The Afghan Local Police (ALP) can be a critical local force, but the plans for post-Transition development and support are uncertain and raise***

*serious questions about their capability, support, and freedom from corruption and abuses. (pp. 133-135.)*

- ***As Russian and other outside studies warn, there is a serious risk the ANSF will fragment or collapse because of ethnic, sectarian, tribal, and regional differences if the election does not produce effective leadership, unity, and governance (pp. 143-154).***
- ***Data from the World Bank, IMF, and UN studies all warn that the State Department, USAID, and various other organizations and NGOs have exaggerated progress in governance and the economy since 2005 (pp. 156-166).***
- ***These same studies warn that the Afghan government is now one of the most corrupt and ineffective governments in the world, and is not ready to manage the security and civil dimensions of Transition at the central government, provincial, or district levels on a nationwide basis (pp. 168-181, 137-141).***
- ***These studies also warn that the government cannot finance itself for the foreseeable future, and is not yet capable of planning and executing a budget that would allow it to control 50% of the necessary flow of aid or implement the reforms called for in the Tokyo Conference (pp. 183-191).*** This creates a significant risk that a major recession could occur once the flow of spending and aid drops sharply, seriously threatening stability along with the pressures of the fighting. There might be a need for major flows of aid to compensate. It also presents a critical problem because US aid seems to be oriented towards peacetime concepts of project aid.
- ***With the exception of the World Bank, reports on progress in the civil sector have largely ignored the massive demographic pressures that have outpaced development and led to an increase in poverty and youth unemployment and under employment (pp. 192-196.)***
- ***The World Bank warns just how serious poverty is as a factor shaping Afghan stability (pp. 198-202).*** It provides a critical warning indicator of what may happen as military spending and aid are cut, although the World Bank indicates that only around 11% of the population has seen any benefits from such spending, and aid has had little overall impact on the Afghan economy. GDP growth depends more on rainfall than development efforts, and officials such as Ashraf Ghani have warned that the massive flow of outside money does as much to distort and corrupt the Afghan economy as it does to develop it.
- ***The World Bank and IMF data warn that the Afghan economy remains far more dependent on narcotics than some US reporting indicates, and many narco-traffickers and power brokers may gain wealth and influence after Transition (pp. 204-211).***

- ***They also warn that – like the myth of the New Silk Road – mines and natural resources offer little prospect of near-term help in supporting Transition. They show that corruption and other barriers seriously limit the private sector’s growth and outside investment, and that the Afghan government will face major problems in supporting post-Transition critical infrastructure. (pp. 213-218)***
- ***Finally, the IMF and World Bank data reinforce the overall fragility of the Afghan economy and show the extent to which White House, State Department, and USAID claims about GDP growth have been driven by rainfall and agriculture that has had no relation to aid efforts and spending. (pp. 220-229)*** This again highlights the risk of a post-Transition recession and the need for US aid in the form of a bailout.

Let me close by being very clear about the meaning of even the most negative trends that I have mentioned. I do not believe that this war has to end in failure as our fighting in Vietnam and Iraq did. I am not convinced that even a precipitous and poorly organized US withdrawal, mixed with deep Afghan divisions and failed governance, would allow the Taliban and other insurgents to dominate. A more divided Afghanistan might emerge, but it would still be functional on some level.

I do believe, however, that we should not lose a war because we do not want to face unpleasant truths and cloak our withdrawal in rhetoric and hollow promises. It may well be time to leave. We have many other higher priorities. But this should be an honest decision based on honest assessment and that honestly addresses the risks in our course of action.