

Prepared statement by

Max Boot

*Jeane J. Kirkpatrick Senior Fellow for National Security Studies
Council on Foreign Relations*

Before the

Committee on Armed Services

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

United States House of Representatives

2nd Session, 112th Congress

Afghan National Security Forces: Resources, Strategy, and Timetable for Security Lead Transition

Chairman Wittman, Ranking Member Cooper, and members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me, along with my distinguished colleagues, to testify about the capabilities of, and outlook for, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Our testimony is particularly valuable, I believe, to act as a corrective on some of the overly sanguine testimony you received at last week's hearing from two representatives of the Department of Defense: Major General Steven Townsend and Deputy Assistant Secretary David Sedney.

I have no quarrel with the major points that they made. The ANSF is indeed growing in size and capability. It is slated to reach an end-strength of 352,000 by the end of this year. Its attrition level is going down, and its literacy level is going up. The ANSF, and in particular the Army (ANA), are also increasing in combat effectiveness, although I would take with a grain of salt some of the statistics tossed out by General Townsend. He said, for example, that "the percentage of Afghan-led partnered operations increased from 33% in January 2012 to 59% in April." In reality, I have found on my regular battlefield circulations in Afghanistan (most recently in March) that the definition of "ANSF-led" is notoriously elastic and can vary widely from one Area of Operations to another. In some cases it means that the ANA planned and executed an operation entirely on its own; in other cases it means that the American unit planned and executed the operation and stuck an Afghan officer in the lead MRAP as they went out to the gate.

The same elasticity applies when you hear generals and administration officials tell you that the ANSF has transitioned, or is about to transition, to take lead responsibility for almost all areas of the country. The ANSF is genuinely in command in areas of northern and western Afghanistan where there are few coalition troops—but the "ANSF lead" is largely a polite fiction when it comes to eastern and southern Afghanistan, where there are still tens of thousands of American troops.

The same might be said for the much ballyhooed turnover of the Parwan detention facility to Afghan control and the agreement to give Afghans control over Special Operations Forces' "night raids." In reality, what we have given Afghans is the symbolism of control without the substance. U.S. troops still perform oversight of the Parwan detention facility and U.S. agreement is still needed to release any prisoners. As for night raids, they continue largely as before, albeit with greater Afghan participation, thanks to a clause which allows the ex post facto issuance of warrants from Afghan judges to make the raids fully legal.

This is not a criticism, mind you. I think that the U.S. has done precisely the right thing by not granting Afghans too much control at this stage, given the operational deficits they still suffer from and the corruption which is endemic in their government. But we should not be fooled by the rhetoric about Afghan competence and control coming from the administration. This is largely happy talk to appease both the government of Afghanistan and American voters who want to see the U.S. role in Afghanistan decrease—although I would add that, while American voters do want all American troops brought home, the government of Afghanistan does not, because it knows that the U.S. will continue to play a vital role in preventing a Taliban takeover or a renewed civil war.

The members of the committee should not be deceived. You should realize that while the ANSF has indeed made impressive strides over the last several years, it still has a long way to go before it is fully capable of securing Afghanistan's vast territory on its own. The ANSF remain reliant on American support for planning, surveillance, reconnaissance, intelligence gathering and analysis, logistics, route clearance, medevac, fire support, air support, and other functions. There is no question that the ANA, in particular, is showing greater tactical competence and greater willingness to get into the fight—casualty figures (which are higher than for coalition forces) attest to that. But the Afghans, as one might imagine of one of the world's poorest countries, still struggle with higher-level functions that are needed to support forces in the field—and they will do so for years to come. They also struggle with morale because they know that the U.S. commitment is temporary and time-limited, whereas the Taliban, with secure sanctuaries in Pakistan, show no signs of going away anytime soon.

The signing of a U.S.-Afghan Security Partnership Accord in April and the Chicago Summit Declaration in May alleviated some of the uncertainty about the post-2014 period—but only some. President Barack Obama and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) heads of state agreed to remain committed in Afghanistan after 2014. However, the nature and extent of that commitment remain opaque, and that in turn feeds anxiety in Afghanistan, contributes to capital flight, buoys the confidence of our enemies, and leads many Afghans to sit on the fence for fear of joining the losing side.

This week the Council on Foreign Relations released a Policy Innovation Memorandum that I wrote (appended at the end of this testimony) which spells out what I believe it will take for the U.S. to succeed in Afghanistan in the years ahead—success being defined as President Obama did when he ordered the troop surge. The president said on December 1, 2009, that he intended to "deny Al Qaeda a safe haven," deny the Taliban "the ability to overthrow the government," and "strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government." Those goals may sound minimal, but they will require a substantial, long-term commitment to achieve.

I would like to highlight here a few of the points I make in the Policy Innovation Memo. My two most important recommendations are: (1) don't cut funding for the ANSF and (2) don't cut U.S. troop levels prematurely.

Regarding the first point: The United States and its allies should commit to provide \$6 billion a year for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) indefinitely to support a force of 350,000 soldiers and police. The administration's plan calls for a cut in funding to \$4.1 billion after 2014, from \$6 billion this year. The administration claims this figure was the result of consultations with the Afghan government and our allies, but as far as I can tell it was unilaterally imposed by Washington *despite* the apprehensions of our Afghan allies. Gen. Abdul Rahim Wardak, the Afghan Minister of Defense, is right to worry about this proposed cut in funding because it would necessitate laying off 120,000 soldiers and police. Many would no doubt find work with insurgents or narco-traffickers, further exacerbating the security situation.

Even as things stand, the ANSF is probably too small on its own to police the entire country. COIN math (the popular rule of thumb being 1 counterinsurgent per 20 people) suggests a need for a force of at least 600,000, roughly the same size as the Iraqi security forces reached in 2009. Arguably, the Afghans can manage with less because the insurgency is strictly confined to Pashtun areas and Pashtuns make up only 42% of the population. But I have seen no plausible argument for how the ANSF, currently stretched to the limit of its resources and beyond, could manage with 120,000 fewer personnel unless peace miraculously breaks out—which, at this point, I would judge to be a vanishingly unlikely prospect.

The administration defends its plan in the interests of fiscal prudence. But while \$2 billion in savings will not make much difference in the context of a \$3.8 trillion U.S. budget, that sum could make a huge difference on the ground in Afghanistan. It could, in fact, be the difference between success and failure. If there is one thing that Congress can do to ensure that the gains which so many Americans have fought so hard for—and which all too many have sacrificed life or limb to achieve—are not lost, it is to make sure that ANSF funding is not cut precipitously.

This does not mean, I should add, that the US will have to pay for Afghanistan's security forces in perpetuity. Once violence decreases and stability improves, Afghanistan will be in a better position to exploit an estimated \$1 trillion in mineral resources that would allow the government to finance its own security forces. But that will take years to bring to fruition. Until then, Afghanistan needs support from the US and its allies to maintain substantial security forces. There is no reason for the US to pay all of the cost by itself—we need to do a more effective job of soliciting contributions from allies who either have not sent troops or are bringing their troops home.

My second major recommendation is that we need to avoid reducing US troop numbers precipitously—both before 2014 and afterward. US troop levels will fall to 68,000 by the end of September, smaller than General David Petraeus and other commanders had judged prudent. I believe that the next president—whether it's Barack Obama or Mitt Romney—should hold off making any further cuts before December 2014 unless conditions on the ground improve. For all the dissatisfaction with the war effort revealed in polls, there is little intensity to the opposition—there are no antiwar demonstrations and the war has not become a major political issue. Thus the next president will have a relatively free hand to maintain current troop levels until

2015 even though the move will not be popular. But maintaining troop levels will at least give commanders a chance to sustain security gains in the south, which has seen a rapid decline in Taliban control since 2009, and to spread security to eastern Afghanistan, where Haqqani sanctuaries remain intact only a few hours' drive from Kabul.

Moreover I believe it would be dangerous and counterproductive to pull too many troops out after 2014. Washington will be tempted to leave the smallest possible presence and to confine troops to safe bases. This would be a mistake. A force of, say, five thousand troops would have a hard time defending itself, much less carrying out its mission. And advisers who are confined to base would not be able to effectively mentor the ANSF or gain "situational awareness." It would be safer and more effective to have a more robust presence so that U.S. troops could protect themselves while also helping the ANSF with logistics, planning, air support, medevac, route clearance, and other important functions. Retired Lieutenant General David Barno and Andrew Exum of the Center for a New American Security have estimated that we would need a force of 23,500 to 35,000 advisers, support personnel, and Special Operations Forces, which would cost \$25 billion to \$35 billion annually. That sounds right to me. Such a commitment should be sustainable for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, even with reduced end-strength, because they have left Iraq and do not have a major role in most Pacific Command contingencies. It would also be sustainable fiscally since it represents just 0.2 percent of U.S. GDP (\$14.6 trillion) and 0.8 percent of the federal budget (\$3.8 trillion).

I know that the measures I recommend will not be popular on Capitol Hill—or among the American public. We would all rather secure Afghanistan with a lesser commitment. But we cannot sustain security on the cheap. The ANSF will not be able, on its own, to prevent a Taliban resurgence. And if the Taliban stage a resurgence, a tiny US Special Operations contingent would not be able to operate effectively on its own.

We are not obligated to make the commitment that I advocate but if we do not, we will not be able to prevent a recurrence of the conditions that led to 9/11. The Taliban have not severed their links with Al Qaeda and other international terrorist groups, and there is every reason to think that, should the Taliban come back into power, they would once again provide a sanctuary for these organizations. If that were to occur the U.S. would suffer a geopolitical disaster—not only would jihadists be able to boast that they had defeated another superpower in Afghanistan but they would be emboldened to step up their attacks in Pakistan as well. Indeed the Pakistani Taliban staged an attack from Afghan territory just a few days ago into Pakistan where they killed 13 Pakistani soldiers. That is a harbinger of things to come if we abandon Afghanistan—the collateral damage will undoubtedly include a further loss of stability in the already unstable state of Pakistan.

The good news is that we can readily avoid a disaster with a significant but decreasing amount of U.S. aid to Afghanistan. Most Afghans have no desire to be ruled by the Taliban. They simply need our continuing aid to consolidate their post-2001 efforts to create a more inclusive and more moderate state.

What It Will Take to Secure Afghanistan

Policy Innovation Memorandum No. 23

Author: Max Boot, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick Senior Fellow for National Security Studies

Afghanistan is approaching a major inflection point in its long and turbulent history. In 2014 most of the foreign military forces are due to pull out. With them will go the bulk of foreign financing that has accounted for almost all of the state's budget. Twenty fourteen is also the year that Afghanistan is due to hold presidential elections. Hamid Karzai, the only president the country has known since the fall of the Taliban, has said he will not seek another term in office. Thus Afghanistan is likely to have a new president to lead it into a new era. This era will be shaped by many factors, principally decisions made by Afghans themselves, but the United States has the ability to affect the outcome if it makes a sustained commitment to maintain security, improve the political process, and reduce Pakistani interference so as to build on the tenuous gains achieved by the U.S. troop surge since 2010.

The Problem

The signing of a U.S.-Afghan Security Partnership Accord in April 2012 and the Chicago Summit Declaration in May alleviated some of the uncertainty about the post-2014 period—but only some. President Barack Obama and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) heads of state agreed to remain committed in Afghanistan after 2014. However, the nature and extent of that commitment remain opaque.

At times Obama has depicted the U.S. mission in Afghanistan in fairly narrow terms—designed, as he said in announcing the troop surge on December 1, 2009, to "deny al-Qaeda a safe haven," deny the Taliban "the ability to overthrow the government," and "strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government." The Chicago Declaration commits the United States to the more ambitious goals of helping craft "a democratic society, based on rule of law and good governance." However attractive the maximalist position, it would require an increased deployment of foreign troops and political advisers, and changes in Afghanistan's political culture, that are unlikely to occur. Yet even the minimalist objective, designed to prevent a return to power by the Taliban (which has consistently refused to renounce its long-standing ties with al-Qaeda and other transnational terrorist groups based in Pakistan and would be likely to provide them a safe haven in Afghanistan), will be impossible to achieve absent a substantial commitment.

Attempts to safeguard U.S. interests "on the cheap" are likely to fail. If the security situation deteriorates, a small number of Special Operations Forces (SOF) would have difficulty operating—as they do today in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan. The Kabul government is only likely to extend cooperation to SOF if, in return, it receives substantial support to maintain its fragile authority. This memo recommends seven specific steps the United States can take to buttress the fragile forces of authority in Afghanistan, grouped into three categories: security, politics, and Pakistan's role.

The Way Ahead

Security

The United States and its allies should commit to provide \$6 billion a year for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) indefinitely to support a force of 350,000 soldiers and police. The administration's plan calls for a cut in funding to \$4.1 billion after 2014, from \$6 billion this year. This would necessitate laying off 120,000 soldiers

and police from the current force of 350,000 soldiers and police, which the Afghans are able to manage with U.S. help. Many would no doubt find work with insurgents or narco-traffickers, further exacerbating the security situation. The administration defends its plan in the interests of fiscal prudence. But while \$2 billion in savings will not make much difference in the context of a \$3.8 trillion U.S. budget, that sum could make a huge difference on the ground in Afghanistan.

Hold off making any further cuts to the force of sixty-eight thousand U.S. troops between September 2012 and December 2014 unless conditions on the ground improve dramatically. There will be pressure in Washington to announce another troop drawdown in late 2012 or early 2013. The next U.S. president—either Obama or Mitt Romney—would be wise to resist that pressure. Only the presence of large numbers of American troops can ensure that security continues to improve. For all the dissatisfaction with the war effort revealed in polls, there is little intensity to the opposition—there are no antiwar demonstrations and the war has not become a major political issue. Thus the next president will have a relatively free hand to maintain current troop levels until 2015 even though the move will not be popular.

Pledge to maintain a substantial advisory and counterterrorism presence after 2014 of twenty-five thousand to thirty-five thousand troops. Washington will be tempted to leave the smallest possible presence after 2014 and to confine troops to safe bases. This would be a mistake unless peace breaks out between now and then. A force of, say, five thousand troops would have a hard time defending itself, much less carrying out its mission. And advisers who are confined to base would not be able to effectively mentor the ANSF or gain "situational awareness." It would be safer and more effective to have a more robust presence so that U.S. troops could protect themselves while also helping the ANSF with logistics, planning, air support, medevac, route clearance, and other important functions. The estimated force size of 23,500 to 35,000, which would cost \$25 billion to \$35 billion annually, is based on work by David Barno and Andrew Exum of the Center for a New American Security. Such a commitment should be sustainable for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, even with reduced end-strength, because they have left Iraq and do not have a major role in most Pacific Command contingencies. It would also be sustainable fiscally since it represents just 0.2 percent of U.S. GDP (\$14.6 trillion) and 0.8 percent of the federal budget (\$3.7 trillion).

Politics

Go slow on peace talks. U.S. officials want a peace deal with the Taliban that would enable a faster U.S. drawdown. But a grand bargain on acceptable terms—with the Taliban giving up their arms and becoming a normal political party—is unlikely. Taliban foot soldiers in Afghanistan may feel coalition pressure, but their leaders remain safe in Pakistan, and Pakistan's generals are loathe to permit the Taliban to sign a peace treaty that could allow them to slip out of Islamabad's grip. Under those conditions, putting too much pressure on Kabul to reach a deal with the Taliban could backfire by causing the Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks to recreate the Northern Alliance and renew the devastating civil war of the 1990s. A better course of action would be to pursue deals with individual Taliban commanders—offering them incentives to stop fighting—and thus try to split the insurgency.

Identify and groom a successor to Karzai. Afghanistan would benefit from a leader more committed to fighting corruption and establishing the rule of law. But the political process is unlikely to produce such a leader on its own. Iran, Pakistan, and various Afghan warlords will back their favored candidates. The United States

should do the same. It is doubtful that an ideal candidate can be found, but, at a minimum, it should be possible to identify the "least bad" one. Admittedly American policymakers erred in picking Karzai in late 2001 and they may err again—but they at least know much more about Afghanistan than they did then. And to avoid making any choice is to cede the decisive vote to malign actors.

Pakistan's Role

End American subsidies for the Pakistani military. The Obama administration cut \$800 million in U.S. military aid to Pakistan in the summer of 2011 after the two countries clashed over the Osama bin Laden raid and other issues. But the administration has held out the prospect of restoring that funding, and it wants to budget roughly \$2 billion for aid to Pakistan in fiscal year 2013. Some payments for the use of Pakistani territory to move supplies to Afghanistan make sense even at the expense of continuing a small degree of reliance on Islamabad, but all other military aid should be terminated because Pakistan has consistently shown that it is a foe of U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Further subsidizing the Pakistani military sends an indirect subsidy to the Taliban and Haqqani Network. Contrary to Washington's worst fears, even after an aid cutoff, Pakistan's army would remain strong enough to keep jihadists from seizing power in Islamabad—an outcome that is opposed by most Pakistanis and, more to the point, most Pakistani generals.

Launch drone and/or SOF strikes on Haqqani and Taliban leaders in Pakistan. Though the CIA and SOF have long targeted terrorist leaders in Pakistan, primarily using drones, their targets have been mostly confined to al-Qaeda. A few Pakistani Taliban and Haqqani leaders have also been eliminated, but senior Taliban figures have not been targeted, because Washington wants to avoid antagonizing Islamabad. But U.S. forces, even at the current force level of eighty-seven thousand, have shown they can survive without the Pakistani logistics line; they have done so since November 2011. Pakistan may also withdraw cooperation in drone strikes on al-Qaeda, but that organization has been so weakened that the strikes are less important now than a few years ago. Regardless of Islamabad's reaction, it is necessary to undertake an aggressive campaign of drone strikes to increase the pressure on the Taliban and the Haqqani Network to prevent them from taking advantage of the NATO drawdown.

Conclusion

Most or all of these steps will be necessary to secure Afghanistan's future, not as an ideal state—a Switzerland of Central Asia—but as a minimally functioning state with security forces that can prevent the reemergence of Taliban rule and the likely reestablishment of al-Qaeda sanctuaries given the close ties between the two organizations. U.S. policymakers may decide that they would rather commit scarce resources elsewhere. But, if so, they should be under no illusions about the ability of the United States to prevent the reemergence of the conditions that led to 9/11. It is difficult enough to shape events in Afghanistan with a substantial U.S. commitment; it will become nearly impossible without it. The good news is that the vast majority of Afghans do not want a return to Taliban rule, and with continuing American support, their post-2001 state should be able to survive the challenges ahead.