

Afghanistan
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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Thank you for that warm introduction. I understand this is your first public event as President of the U.S. Institute of Peace—I hope I make you proud! Thank you also for the opportunity to be with you today to discuss the way forward in Afghanistan. I'm grateful to the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Alliance in Support of the Afghan People for providing this forum, as well as for your work to promote a stable, peaceful Afghanistan that's an ally in the war against al Qaeda and its affiliates. I appreciate your bipartisan—really, non-partisan—support for America's national security and the Afghan people. I'd particularly like to salute the Alliance's Scott Mackey, who has shown how much a small organization can accomplish by determination, commitment, and grit, despite limited resources.

America has waged war and peace in Afghanistan for over thirteen years. Our taxpayers have spent a lot, and our sons and daughters have bled and died there in a difficult effort to ensure that America will never again face a terrorist attack launched from the Hindu Kush mountains. It's natural to grow weary, even frustrated, with Afghanistan's seemingly endless complexities and problems.

Few people are more aware of these difficulties than I and the men and women with whom I had the honor to serve in Afghanistan. We have seen grinding poverty, a fanatical yet skillful enemy, societal scars from three decades of constant war, corruption and its ill effects, political dysfunction, and constant bickering among well-meaning partners with differing interests and agendas. It's easy for the international media to portray these problems vividly, so much that many Americans know Afghanistan only as a hopeless endeavor.

But Afghanistan is not hopeless. Afghans, Americans, and international partners have, on the contrary, made tremendous gains there—gains that have made our country safer and more secure while giving millions of Afghans a chance to live safe, healthy, honorable, and meaningful lives.

America is safer today because our efforts in Afghanistan yielded this singular achievement: that country remains the only place in the world from which we expelled al Qaeda and have prevented it from returning. That success alone isn't enough, of course, to protect the U.S. from an expanding al Qaeda and other terrorist threats around the world.

But let's never forget Afghanistan is where al Qaeda was born. It's where Jalaluddin Haqqani, founder of the Haqqani Network, which remains one of the most virulent insurgencies in Afghanistan, invited Osama bin Laden to set up his first training camps in the 1980s. It's where the Taliban under Mullah Omar sheltered bin Laden and refused to give him up after the 9/11 attacks. It's where al Qaeda leadership would love to return, to plant their flag again, and to declare, wrongly, that they defeated the American superpower just as they falsely claim to have defeated the Soviet empire. We can't give them that chance.

Further, America has a moral imperative to support and assist the human gains Afghanistan has made over the past decade. We correctly toppled the Taliban government and committed, along with the UN, NATO, and many international partners, to help Afghans establish a stable, peaceful country that gives hope and dignity to their people. We must honor that commitment to a people who've fought so hard and taken so many losses fighting our common enemies.

There are many reasons for hope in Afghanistan today. Perhaps the most important is the fact that Afghanistan has just completed the first peaceful, democratic transition of power in its history—a history that's older than our own, dating back to the middle of the 18th century. Also, the Afghan National Security Forces continue to improve and are taking the fight to the enemy every day. And Afghans have seen enormous gains in the quality of their lives. Conditions truly are getting better in Afghanistan.

There is also reason, however, for concern. The Taliban and allied jihadists continue to attack the Afghan security forces, testing them and trying to demoralize them. Afghanistan's political balance remains extremely delicate. Its economy, still struggling with corruption, is imperiled by the stark reductions in international aid that lie ahead. The gains that we and the Afghan people have made can still collapse into anarchy and ruin. That would be a tragedy for the Afghan people and a stain on America's honor. Worse still, it would imperil the safety of the American people. We must therefore turn away from an unwise policy of total withdrawal according to fixed and arbitrary deadlines and instead recommit ourselves to supporting improved Afghan security and governance.

Conditions Have Gotten Better in Afghanistan

It's easier to portray misery, violence, and despair than the gradual, quiet progress of daily improvement. Many Americans therefore understandably question our continued engagement in a land where such improvement seems so limited. But those who have served there over the years know that NATO's presence truly has changed the country in important ways, from healthcare, education, and infrastructure to governance and security.

Before 2001, medical care was almost totally inaccessible for most Afghans. Now, 85% of the country has access to a health professional and better healthcare has made a big difference in the lives of ordinary Afghans. For example, Afghanistan's maternal mortality rate has plunged by more than 80%. And the life expectancy of the average Afghan has increased by six years since just 2001. Afghans are learning that a longer, healthier life is possible. They're also learning that liberty and openness to the outside world and other ideas can enrich and improve their lives, whereas the fanaticism and anti-modernism of the Taliban brought only devastation, poverty, and premature death. That's an important victory in the fight to delegitimize the hateful ideology of Islamic jihadists.

The Afghan people have also made educational gains. Today, eight million Afghan children are enrolled in school, up from just one million in 2002. And girls now account for 40% of students, when just fourteen years ago they were prohibited by the Taliban from even attending school. Literacy has improved over

the last decade, particularly among children and young adults, although it remains far too low.

Better literacy, like improved healthcare, not only improves Afghan society and its economy, but also is essential to helping Afghans secure their country from our common foes. Healthy, literate soldiers fight better and learn faster. Soldiers who cherish the health of their families and the education of their kids fight harder to protect those opportunities. This kind of social progress is a critical element of security in any country.

A third area of tangible improvement is infrastructure, as I witnessed personally during my service with a Provincial Reconstruction Team in 2008 and 2009. Since 2001, at least 10,000 miles of roads have been built. That's enough to drive across the continental U.S. three times. These roads enable the movement of people and goods that is so critical to economic growth and security. Afghanistan's economy has a long way to go, of course, since it was virtually obliterated by the civil wars and Taliban rule in the 1990s. But the international community, with American assistance, has been helping Afghans build the essential infrastructure they will need to have an economy again in the future.

These efforts serve our interests as well as those of the Afghans. The destruction of Afghanistan's economy has made Afghanistan largely dependent on foreign assistance to survive. Neither Americans nor any other people want to go on paying for Afghanistan's government and security forces forever, yet we need both to function in order to prevent al Qaeda from reclaiming its lost birth land. That is why our continued assistance now is important, and why money spent wisely now will save much more down the road.

An increasingly robust and capable Afghan National Security Forces has continued to fight hard against enemy counter-offensives even as our forces have been dramatically reduced. Recruitment remains strong for both the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, although casualties remain higher than those forces can likely sustain. Among the Afghan security forces, the Special Forces are performing particularly well. They're able to plan and conduct targeted strikes against insurgent and enemy leaders and concentrations with greatly reduced U.S. and coalition assistance—a capability that will be essential in fighting al Qaeda and its allies over the long term.

Afghanistan's military and police leaders are also developing. Just weeks ago, leaders from an Afghan National Army Corps, Afghan Border Police, a Pakistani Army Corps, and a delegation from NATO's Resolute Support headquarters discussed border security at Operational Base Fenty in Nangahar. Reports indicate that these commanders exchanged intelligence, considered future operations, and discussed the mutual benefits of cross-border cooperation. It wasn't that long ago that Afghan and Pakistani forces were exchanging artillery fire across the border. We should applaud this change as a possible harbinger of improved relations between Afghanistan and its most important neighbor.

Finally, NATO has a new partner after the first peaceful, democratic transition of power in Afghanistan's history. Gone is a difficult and sometimes erratic former leadership, replaced by a more cooperative and pro-Western President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer, Abdullah Abdullah. With so

much else going wrong in the world, too many people have overlooked this critical change.

Consider that, within hours of taking office, President Ghani signed the Bilateral Security Agreement with the U.S. and the Status of Forces Agreement with NATO. These agreements provide the legal framework for a continued American and NATO military presence in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's parliament then ratified the agreement promptly and without meaningful opposition. President Ghani has also pledged greater economic, security, and legal reforms, increased rights for women and minorities as well as initiatives to fight the corruption rampant under his predecessor.

By all indications, President Ghani has also embraced the fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda in a way that his predecessor never did, immediately lifting previous restrictions on the ability of U.S. forces to help Afghan troops take the fight to our common enemies. In short, he appears to be a reliable partner for the West, and we should take this change in leadership and attitude as a needed opportunity.

Conditions Will Get Worse if the U.S. Withdraws as Planned

Despite this progress, Afghanistan's gains are reversible if the United States sticks with a deadline-driven withdrawal irrespective of conditions on the ground. When I was deployed to Afghanistan, the bad guys liked to say, "Americans have the watches, but we have the time." Regrettably, the current withdrawal plan may prove them right.

Under the current plan, we have already cut our troop levels to approximately 10,000 personnel. And, before the end of this year, that number will be cut roughly in half again. Partly because of these reductions, the NATO mission has already transitioned to mostly training behind walled compounds. This mission is being conducted at a sprint's pace, as our forces must also focus on rapidly closing the sites.

Ultimately, our troop levels are predicted to drop below 1,000 troops by January 2017. Commanders predict what they call a "Kabul-centric" mission as we contract to the capital, closing even Bagram Airfield—the country's principal logistical hub and airbase. It's unclear today what that mission will be, but when you consider the number of troops needed just to secure Kabul Airfield and the American Embassy in Kabul, it's hard to imagine any further mission they could accomplish.

It's not hard to predict the potential consequences of this decision, and I will venture to do so. While the Afghan National Security Forces have made real gains, they're not in a place where we can be assured of their long-term stability and success. In the past year alone, nearly 5,000 members of the Afghan military and police have been killed fighting the Taliban—twice the number of Americans killed in the country since 2001. The Afghans continue to need the support of NATO intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, air power, medical evacuation, and logistics. These are not front-line trigger-pullers, but they are critical combat enablers that require time and investment to develop.

Without this support, the front-line Afghan troops are likely to struggle increasingly against the enemy. After all, the Taliban have continued brutal, brazen

attacks. They assaulted a major military base in Helmand Province just weeks after British forces turned it over to Afghan control. And there was another major attack in Kabul just days ago.

Withdrawing support and weakening the Afghan National Security Forces could well set off a tragic chain of events. The Taliban will continue to regain strength in its traditional southern and eastern heartland. As ominous, the Haqqani network, closely tied to al Qaeda, would have the opportunity to regain control of its old territory in southeastern Afghanistan where Osama bin Laden set up his first training camps in the 1980s, at the invitation of the Haqqanis.

These enemy gains could not only threaten the Afghan National Security Forces on the battlefield, but could also splinter the country. Afghanistan's northern ethnic groups suffered terribly under the Taliban and remain fearful of its return. As the forces arrayed against the government and people begin to resemble the old Taliban coalition that swept into power in the 1990s, those former Northern Alliance commanders will face considerable pressure to retrench and protect the northern ethnic groups, potentially triggering an ethnic conflict.

For multiple reasons, then, the Afghan National Security Forces won't be able to preserve the territorial integrity of the country or defeat terrorist groups on its own soil without some U.S. and NATO assistance for a considerable time. They might not fall apart immediately if that support is withdrawn prematurely, but a war of attrition over a number of years is very unlikely to end well. Meantime, the lack of NATO military presence will also impair or even prevent other agencies from performing their critical missions, further weakening our counterterrorism efforts.

This could be a tragic replay of what happened when the U.S. abandoned Afghanistan after the Soviet Union withdrew. Eastern Afghanistan—the exact place from which al Qaeda launched the 9/11 attacks—could again become a lawless safe haven, as could Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas just across the border. Terrorists could not only once again use this territory to plan and launch attacks against America, but also to destabilize Pakistan, with the ultimate prize of obtaining nuclear material from that nuclear-armed country.

The Afghan people and their new government would be caught in the crossfire, along with all the progress both have made. That would be more than a humanitarian and moral disaster; it would also be a grave security threat as it would further empower Islamic jihadists and lend credence to their narrative that the West will always abandon Afghanistan and they, the fanatics, will always triumph.

Of course, one need not return to Afghanistan's history, instructive though it may be, to see the consequences of a deadline-driven withdrawal. One need only look west to Iraq. Against the best military judgment of his commanders, President Obama withdrew all troops from Iraq in 2011—a decision he telegraphed in early 2009. Things looked good at the time. Thanks to the bravery of our troops and the skill of our intelligence and diplomatic professionals, the Iraq war was all but won and al Qaeda in Iraq was defeated.

But we managed to snatch disaster from the jaws of certain victory. The Iraqi Security Forces were not yet ready to fight alone, without western combat enablers. Iraq's leadership lost many of the constraints on its sectarian tendencies when the last American troops departed. The terrorist remnants of al Qaeda in Iraq took

advantage of an ungoverned cross-border territory—sound familiar?—to regroup. And the al Qaeda in Iraq morphed into the Islamic State, a terrorist army with great wealth, armored vehicles, artillery, and the ability to maneuver against conventional forces on the ground. And their rapid advance on Mosul, Iraq’s second city, collapsed two Iraqi Army divisions and gave Islamists undisputed control of major urban areas for the first time in history.

Today, the Islamic State is still rampaging across both Iraq and Syria. They’re beheading Americans and the citizens of our closest allies—or burning them alive. They’re again attacking Kirkuk and continue to pressure Baghdad. They’re attracting thousands of foreign Muslims who want to sign up for jihad with “the strong horse,” as bin Laden famously called radical Islam in the 1990s. And many hold western passports and have an ultimate aim to attack us here.

We are now living with these deadly consequences, facing a much greater threat in Iraq than if we had simply accepted our military commanders’ recommendations at the time. Indeed, we may be reaching by slow motion the same troop levels in Iraq that we would’ve had, only under much worse conditions. We should not repeat the mistake of Iraq in Afghanistan, where the consequences could be even worse.

What the U.S. Needs To Do

Instead we should commit **now**—today—to keeping at least 10,000 troops in Afghanistan until 2017, and perhaps beyond. This commitment is based not on an arbitrary deadline, but on conditions on the ground, as it should be today and in the future. This commitment also will show our partners—the Afghan people and our allies—that we’re serious about keeping Afghanistan on the path to a stable, secure future. And these troop levels will preserve a genuine counter-terrorism capability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while ensuring that we can provide critical support to the Afghan security forces.

Further, we should provide our troops with flexibility to engage any enemy in conjunction with the Afghan security forces. We ought not limit them to so-called “pure” al Qaeda when our Afghan partners are targeting the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and other affiliated groups. We must help the Afghans target the enemies killing their soldiers and civilians, as well as the enemies that concern us most.

In addition to security assistance, we should help Afghanistan through the coming loss of large amounts of international aid. While Afghanistan has depended heavily on aid in recent times, we now know that its huge mineral deposits can support the state over time. This will take time, though, and the U.S., along with our allies, should help President Ghani overcome the legal, structural, and procedural obstacles to this progress.

This is not, nor should it be, no-strings-attached foreign aid. On the contrary, corruption and a parallel, black economy undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan state and fuel the insurgency. Fortunately, President Ghani, a former World Bank economist, appears to agree, having re-opened the investigation of the Kabul Bank scandal, a good faith effort to help Afghanistan meet its obligations under the 2012 Tokyo Framework for Mutual Accountability. We should build upon this success,

and we also must recommit to attacking the finances of al Qaeda, the Taliban, and affiliated groups around the world.

Above all is this central fact: Afghanistan is at the heart of America's national-security policy. Were it not for al Qaeda's safe haven there, we might not have been attacked on 9/11. And Afghanistan remains our one, irrefutable victory in the war against Islamic terror: we expelled al Qaeda and it hasn't returned.

For these reasons, President Obama used to say that Afghanistan was "the good war." He was right: the war in Afghanistan is a just and noble war. To follow what I have contended is the right course of action in this war, the president will need to reverse earlier decisions and modify previous statements. No politician relishes that. But, if he does, President Obama will find that he has not just supporters, but advocates within my own party, as well as his own. More important, he will find an American people, awakened again to the danger abroad, that are ready to support their commander-in-chief in pursuit of America's vital national-security interests.