

**Statement of Ms. Sarah Chayes,
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Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Thursday, July 11, 10:00 a.m.**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, committee-members, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you about conditions in Afghanistan, and the implications for U.S. policy.

My analysis derives from a rare dual perspective: I lived in downtown Kandahar for most of the past decade, among ordinary men and women from the city and the surrounding villages, no guards or barbed wire, no translator. And, from 2009 through 2011, I served as special adviser to two ISAF commanders and then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Of course, my judgments are my own. They got used to that -- most of them.

Three main topics dominate the current Afghanistan debate: the security situation -- and related to that, the size of a residual U.S. military force -- the 2014 presidential election, and negotiations with the Taliban. In each case, attention is fixed on the formal process, while the real meaning lies beneath that surface. What is missing is an overall political strategy within which technicalities might add up to something. At this stage, that strategy must include a more broad-based reconciliation process that would help set the stage for credible elections, and a different approach to Pakistan.

On elections. Some in Washington argue for making the 2014 exercise central to U.S. policy. They focus on voter registration and other such technicalities. I don't disagree with the sentiment.

But while we are all discussing the vital importance of a credible election, moves are being made on the ground to ensure it will be no such thing. Sadly, what matters in Afghan elections as they are currently run is not who can mobilize the most votes, but who can control the process. So President Karzai and his lieutenants in the executive branch are grappling with some of your counterparts over the makeup and duties of the election commission and the complaints body. No surprise, Karzai is winning. As of this weekend, the head of the election commission declared that the tussle over the electoral law had gone on too long for the provisions to be implemented, and that Karzai would be enacting regulations by legislative decree.

In this context, I've already spoken about the issues raised by U.S. payments to the key political actor.

Recommendation: If the U.S. government is going to lend the moral authority of this country to the 2014 election, then words like “credible” have to mean something. U.S. financing and support for the vote must be contingent on Kabul’s adherence to some minimum standards. A truly independent, empowered elections commission whose members are not appointed by the president, for example, and a real complaints mechanism, with teeth. If President Karzai wants to run an election he can control, that’s his right. But not on the U.S. dime, and not on the democratic reputation of the United States.

On security: Much attention has been devoted to the Afghan National Security Forces’ tactical capabilities. There have been improvements -- though vetting and discipline problems were devastating just a year ago. And the ANSF casualty rate has spiked over last year’s, according to UK officials. Attrition is also up.

But the technical skills of Afghan soldiers are really beside the point. The real meaning is this. An army -- the best army -- is only a tool in the hands of a government. You can exercise that army, sort of like taking an arm to a gym and lifting weights with it, but if the body to which it’s attached is non-viable, it won’t be able to defend much. That is the fundamental point that keeps getting missed in discussions about ANSF capabilities.

Trying to get a meaningful read on the security situation is elusive. ISAF stopped keeping violence statistics in March. And they were disputable anyway. So only localized anecdotes are left. There are clear improvements around Kandahar. Colleagues of mine are now able to visit areas that were under deadly Taliban control in 2009. The current police chief of Kandahar is keeping the Taliban at bay, but I’m hearing at such a cost in extra-judicial killing that he’s turning much of the town against him. I have known him for more than a decade and this was to be expected. I warned General David Petraeus, then commander of ISAF, about the police chief’s style and the potential Leahy amendment issues it raises. Meanwhile, northern Helmand is already re-infested with Taliban, according to both residents and U.S. military personnel.

A point often missed in assessments of security is that the Taliban’s strategy is to obtain the maximum policy impact for the minimum investment of resources. That is what asymmetric warfare is all about. Recent spectacular attacks in Kabul and elsewhere indicate they’re still doing a good job at that.

What local deals are being made between a given *kandak* and the local Haqqani commander? Whose fighters are waiting for ISAF’s final departure? What depredations are the local police committing? No one can claim to know, beyond a very localized understanding.

So any assessment of current security trends can only be a surface impression. Its significance for predicting outcomes is minimal.

As for residual U.S. troops, 10,000 would not make much more of an impact on security and stability in Afghanistan than zero. My reading of the signals in this town is that zero is a likely bet. And to be honest, in the absence of an overall policy framework within which the commitment and sacrifice would make sense, I find it difficult to argue otherwise.

But how to get to zero U.S. troops after 2014 without leaving a black hole behind? How to get to zero responsibly, honoring the efforts and losses of so many, and preserving some potential for the Afghan people and for regional security? The obligation the United States engaged by intervening in the first place – and the historical memory in that region of the U.S. just leaving -- imposes one last effort to think that through.

Recommendation: Don't look to security structures to provide security amidst political melt-down. The way to wind down U.S. involvement in Afghanistan without the place unraveling behind us is *not* to focus on military technicalities. It is to take a different approach to the political context.

On negotiations: The idea of a single negotiating track with Taliban leadership was never the right approach to the political context -- for several reasons. The ISI involvement with Taliban leadership may be complex and fraught, but it is deep and effective. It is likely that the ISI started reconstituting the Taliban in late 2002 -- and I watched them doing it -- with precisely the aim of negotiations in mind. They, like us, presumed an insurgency would end in negotiations, and they wanted to drive us there, and then control the outcome. The aim was to regain a degree of the proxy control over Afghanistan that they enjoyed under the Taliban regime. Now, however the relationship may have evolved, the ISI certainly retains enough hold over Taliban leadership to choose who goes to Doha, and what they settle for. And ironically, we have been practically begging Pakistani officials to play that role.

In other words, we would never be negotiating with autonomous representatives of an Afghan movement in Doha, even if talks started. We'd be talking to the ISI by proxy. That carries a couple of implications. It means we are effectively rewarding Pakistan for the deliberate use of violent proxies as an instrument of national policy. Other countries, like Iran and North Korea, may take notice. And it means that the terms of any deal that might result would likely be unacceptable to most Afghans, because they would entail surrendering too much sovereignty.

Which brings me to my next point: it's not just the Taliban who are bitterly opposed to the way the Karzai government has been operating. Most Afghans are. But the others did not take up arms. Even though the ballot box -- due to fraud -- has not been a

recourse. And yet, those Afghans have no seat at these negotiations. We are in effect punishing the nonviolent opposition in our rush to placate the violent opposition. This approach does not line up with our values as a nation. And it is almost guaranteed not to work – but rather to lead directly to the next war.

Recommendation: Two prongs. With respect to Afghan reconciliation, make it much more inclusive, along the lines of what the French tested in Chantilly late last year. Include all the major constituencies, including the Taliban and members of the Karzai government, as co-equal participants. Choice of participants would necessarily be arbitrary and imperfect at this late date, but it can easily be made more representative than the Doha process. Talks should be facilitated by talented international mediators, perhaps sponsored by one or more of our NATO partners.

With respect to Pakistan, first and -- in concert with our allies including the UK -- raise the cost of using violent proxies as an instrument of policy, by means of an array of leverage and smart sanctions. Certainly do not ask Pakistani officials to act as agents to help organize intra-Afghan talks. Second, open a proper, formal, state-to-state channel through which Pakistan can identify and address its legitimate strategic aspirations and concerns with respect to its neighbor. Again, this is the type of initiative international bodies are well-placed to help facilitate.

Mr Chairman, only such a change in our political approach can offer a way to conclude U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan without leaving the region even more dangerous than we found it in 2001. Such an adjustment would not require more material resources, just more focus and attention, and the willingness to take some political risk.

Thank you for inviting me to share these thoughts.