

Prepared statement by

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Before the

**Senate Committee on Foreign Relations**

**Subcommittee on Near East and South and Central Asian Affairs**

*United States Senate*

*1<sup>st</sup> Session, 113<sup>th</sup> Congress*

**Prospects for Afghanistan's 2014 Election**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, Members of the Subcommittee:

I recently returned from a week in Afghanistan where I have been traveling regularly since 2008 to assess the state of the military campaign at the request of our military commanders. During this visit I went to Kabul as well as to Regional Command South (in Kandahar) and Regional Command Southwest (in Helmand). Along with a delegation from the Council on Foreign Relations, I met with Afghan and American soldiers and officials including Gen. Joe Dunford, Ambassador James Cunningham and Defense Minister Bismullah Muhammad. I thank you for inviting me to testify about the Afghan election in 2014 which is one of the most important factors determining Afghanistan's future. To place it into context I would like to comment not only on the election but on other factors of vital importance to the outcome of our mission. What follows is closely based on an article I have written for the June 5 issue of National Review summing up my most recent observations.

The fundamental question we face is: Will America's decade-plus effort to bring stability and security to Afghanistan succeed? I saw cause for both pessimism and optimism as the country hurtles toward a turning point: the self-imposed December 2014 deadline for all NATO "combat" troops (though not necessarily military advisers and Special Operations Forces) to leave the country.

The most important reason to think that Afghanistan may turn out just fine is the progress being made by the Afghan National Security Forces, now 352,000 strong. The formal forces are augmented by 20,000 Afghan Local Police, an auxiliary, village-based security force that is particularly feared by the Taliban, who are targeting its leaders for assassination. The Afghan security forces, and in particular the army, are now in the lead in 80% of all security operations, and in June they will take control of the entire country. Already the Afghans, not coalition troops, are bearing the brunt of the battle as evidenced by casualty figures which show that far more Afghan than coalition troops are being killed and wounded—a reversal of the prevailing trend of the past decade.

I came away impressed from my meetings with Afghan army officers such as Maj. Gen. Sayeed Malook, commander of the 215th Corps in Helmand Province, who present a professional appearance and convey an unyielding determination to fight the dushman (enemy) as they call the Taliban. If the Afghan army continues to receive substantial Western support (a big if, to be sure), it is unlikely to lose a single battle to the ragtag fighters of the Taliban.

Another cause for optimism is the result of American-led counterinsurgency operations in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, both of which I visited. US troops, along with the international and Afghan partners, have routed the Taliban out of most of their southern sanctuaries. Enemy-initiated attacks in Kandahar province, I was told, fell 70% between 2011 and 2012. Kandahar City, the biggest urban area in the south, remains more secure than ever despite (or possibly because of) the assassination in 2011 of Ahmed Wali Karzai, a half-brother of the president who was the de facto political boss of the region. Last summer the Taliban did not succeed in killing a single significant leader in Kandahar where security is now in the hands of the much-feared police chief, Gen. Abdul Razik.

Yet more grounds for optimism can be found in the continuing security and growing economic development of western and northern Afghanistan, the region anchored by Herat in the west and by Mazar-e-Sharif in the north. This has less to do with security operations by Afghans or their coalition allies than with simple demographics: the insurgency is largely confined to the Pashtun population and there are few Pashtuns in the north and west.

Against these positive factors must be weighed three major negatives. First, and most important, Pakistan. The rift in U.S.-Pakistan relations which opened after the 2011 Osama bin Laden raid has superficially healed—the Pakistanis have reopened NATO's supply line from the port of Karachi and resumed nominal cooperation on cross-border security. But in reality the Pakistani army, the real arbiter of its foreign policy, continues to support the Afghan Taliban even while fighting its counterpart, the Pakistani Taliban. Some factions of the Taliban might want to make peace, but the Pakistanis are not allowing it—they see the Taliban as their best bet to exert influence in post-2014 Afghanistan. That's why peace talks, in which the Obama administration has invested so many hopes, are going nowhere fast. Given that cross-border sanctuaries are a big boon for any insurgency, Pakistan's role remains a spoiler even though security forces have made considerable progress in southern Afghanistan since 2009 in spite of Pakistan's support for the insurgency.

A second, and related, negative is the continuing instability of eastern Afghanistan, the region located along the mountainous frontier with Pakistan. U.S. commanders have never had enough troops to do “clear and

hold” operations in most of this area. While Kabul itself remains secure and bustling (notwithstanding a recent suicide bomber attack on a convoy carrying US military advisers and contractors), nearby provinces such as Ghazni, Logar, and Wardak are still infested with Taliban and Haqqani Network fighters. This insecurity, if left unaddressed, eventually could spill over and threaten the capital, which also happens to be the country’s largest and most important city.

A third and final negative—one too-seldom mentioned by U.S. officials—is the continuing corruption of the government of Afghanistan, which is dominated by an avaricious clique of warlords, drug barons, and powerbrokers in cahoots with President Hamid Karzai and his family. Afghanistan’s leading clans have robbed the country blind over the past decade, stealing billions in foreign aid. Their rapaciousness has alienated substantial sectors of the population and provided an opening for the Taliban who, while themselves complicit in the drug trade, promise to deliver a harsh brand of Islamic justice.

The positives and negatives of Afghanistan are closely balanced. The ultimate outcome may well be decided by three upcoming events.

First, the Afghan security forces must show that security gains in the south are sustainable. This summer will be their first major test—the first fighting season when coalition troops are not in the lead. If the Afghan army and police can hold onto gains achieved largely by U.S. forces, that will be a major psychological boost for them—and a major blow to the Taliban. While U.S. commanders are understandably focused on this immediate challenge, an even bigger test will come in the summer of 2014 when there will be no more than 34,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The ultimate test will come after 2014 when the U.S. presence will be even further diminished.

Second, Afghans must emerge from their April 2014 presidential election (assuming it occurs as planned) with a new leader who can unite diverse sectarian and political factions. A fractious outcome, with ballot-stuffing rampant and no candidate able to claim legitimacy, would be disastrous for the country’s long-term prospects. So too would be any attempt by Hamid Karzai to hold onto power beyond the length of his current term, whether by postponing the election or simply by changing the constitution. On the other hand, a peaceful transfer of power, the first in Afghanistan’s modern history, to a new president with widespread support would be a major blow to the Taliban and their Al Qaeda allies.

Third, Afghans must know that the U.S. will provide the support necessary to keep their country together. Afghans understandably fear they will be abandoned after 2014, just as they were abandoned by the West after the departure of the Red Army in 1989. That’s why property prices in Kabul are falling and capital flight is increasing. Only the announcement of a substantial post-2014 commitment by the U.S. can reassure Afghans that the Taliban will not come back.

What can we do now, at this late date, to ensure that the negatives don’t overwhelm the positives? Plenty. For a start, the U.S. and its allies must continue to provide at least \$5 billion a year to the Afghan security forces, the minimum necessary to preserve a force of 352,000, but more than the \$4.1 billion pledged at the Chicago NATO Summit last year. Unless the \$4.1 billion figure is increased, the Afghan forces will have to lay off 120,000 soldiers and police at the very time when coalition forces are withdrawing. That would be a disastrous combination.

The Obama administration should also announce that it will keep at least 13,600 U.S. troops in Afghanistan after 2014 to assist the Afghan security forces—the minimum number recommended by recently retired Gen. Jim Mattis of Central Command. If the U.S. were to ante up, our allies would probably provide another 6,000 or so troops, bringing the total coalition presence to around 20,000. That’s still short of the 30,000 or so troops that ace analysts Fred and Kim Kagan have argued would be needed to maintain robust operations in eastern and southern Afghanistan—but it should be sufficient, if just barely, to avert disaster. It is especially important that the U.S. continue to provide air support and medevac capability since Afghanistan won’t have a functioning air force before 2017 at the earliest.

Unfortunately the administration is hinting it will send substantially fewer troops—the president has told NATO to begin initial planning for a force of 8,000 to 12,000 troops. The U.S., which has historically provided two-thirds of all coalition forces, presumably would provide no more than 5,400 to 8,000 of the total. That is such a low figure that U.S. troops would have trouble sustaining and defending themselves, much less projecting power to outlying regions. That, in turn, will make it hard for the Afghans to fight effectively and thus increase the risk of the army fracturing along ethnic lines, with the Pashtuns making common cause with the Taliban and the Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks recreating the Northern Alliance. Such an outcome would plunge Afghanistan back into the disastrous civil war of the 1990s which led to the rise of the Taliban in the first place.

President Karzai can help to avert this dire fate by being more cooperative in efforts to negotiate a status of forces agreement with the U.S. that would allow our troops legal immunity. He does not want to make the mistake that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki of Iraq made: He tried to drive a hard bargain, only to have Obama walk away from the negotiations and pull all U.S. troops out. That remains a possibility in Afghanistan, too, especially if Karzai continues to bad-mouth the U.S. publically, thereby undermining American support for a continuing commitment.

In addition to keeping a substantial contingent of advise-and-assist and Special Operations troops after 2014, the U.S. must launch an immediate campaign to counter Pakistan’s destabilizing efforts in Afghanistan. The model is the covert campaign mounted by U.S. forces in Iraq in 2007-2008 to blunt the influence of Iran’s Quds Forces, which involved doing everything from arresting and deporting Iranian operatives to publicizing their machinations. The U.S. must recognize that Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence is our enemy in Afghanistan and act accordingly, instead of clinging to the fiction that the Pakistanis are our friends and allies. Nor should we cling to the illusion, so beloved of diplomats, that Pakistan can be induced to jettison the Taliban as a part of some kind of regional “grand bargain” involving Iran, China, and Russia. That is about as likely to occur as a breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, another chimera pursued by generations of diplomatists.

Given that we have less need of Pakistani support than we once did to target Al Qaeda’s much-weakened central organization, we should also not be afraid of using drones and, if necessary, Special Operations raids to target Taliban leaders and arms caches in Pakistan—something we have not done to date for fear of offending Islamabad. It is shameful that the Taliban are allowed the free run of towns such as Chaman, a Pakistani border crossing facing the Afghan town of Spinbaldak in Kandahar Province. Coalition air strikes

would not defeat the Taliban but they would break Taliban leaders' sense of impunity and keep them balance as U.S. troops draw down.

Finally to the subject you have highlighted in this hearing: I believe the U.S. government must become more active in shaping the outcome of the Afghan presidential election. Ballot fraud is likely to be prevalent again, as it was in 2009, but that need not be fatal since the outcome is likely to be determined not in the actual voting but in backroom deals among political bosses—as was the norm in an earlier period of American history. Talks are currently going on among powerbrokers in Kabul, what some jocularly refer to as the “Afghan primary,” to sort out a long list of presidential wannabes such as Education Minister Farooq Wardak, former Karzai chief of staff Umer Daudzai, former finance minister Ashraf Ghani, former interior minister Ali Jalali, the president’s brother, Qayum Karzai, former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, former presidential candidate (and foreign minister) Abdullah Abdullah, and even the Afghan-American former U.S. ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad.

The U.S. government was burned by its experience in 2009 when efforts by former Ambassador Karl Eikenberry and the late special envoy Richard Holbrooke to encourage a more competitive election were interpreted by Karzai to mean that the U.S. was trying to block his reelection, thereby making him even more difficult to deal with once he secured a suspect victory. As a result, U.S. Embassy officials today are loathe to discuss presidential candidates, even in private, for fear of appearing to choose sides. This crippling reticence only increases the prospect of either a deadlocked process or the emergence of discredited front-runner, e.g., Qayum Karzai, who would have a hard time winning credibility either in Afghanistan or in the West. Instead of standing on the sidelines, the U.S. needs to use its considerable clout—including, if necessary, the bags of cash the CIA has been providing to President Karzai—to ensure the selection of the strongest possible president, one who would take on warlords and the Taliban more effectively than the incumbent has done.

Based on the current situation, I would put the odds at roughly 55%-45% that Afghanistan will be able to avoid a civil war and a possible return to Taliban rule. That’s more optimistic than the pessimism which prevails in the U.S., where most people wrongly assume the war is already lost, but it is hardly a ringing endorsement. With the relatively modest steps outlined above, however, President Obama could dramatically increase the odds of success.

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Max Boot is one of America’s leading military historians and foreign-policy analysts. The Jeane J. Kirkpatrick senior fellow in national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, Max Boot is the author of three widely acclaimed books: *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*, *War Made New: Technology, Warfare, and the Course of History, 1500 to Today*, and, most recently, the New York Times best-seller *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present*. Max Boot is also a contributing editor to *The Weekly Standard* and the *Los Angeles Times*, a blogger for *Commentary*, and a regular contributor to the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and many other publications. Max Boot has advised military commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan, and his books have been assigned reading by the military services.

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