

**Testimony of Richard G. Olson  
Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan  
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Wednesday, December 16, 2015**

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today to discuss the U.S.-Afghanistan relationship and our continuing effort to support Afghanistan's progress towards security and self-reliance.

Allow me at the outset to thank the members of this committee and the American people for their generous and steadfast support for our efforts in Afghanistan. In particular, I want to honor the thousands of military personnel, diplomats, and development professionals who have served and continue to serve in Afghanistan.

Mr. Chairman, I recently returned from my first trip in my current position as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan to Kabul and Islamabad, and I can report to you that we are at a critical moment in our work in Afghanistan and the region as we push for the launch of an Afghan-led peace process during the traditional winter lull in the fighting between Afghanistan and the Taliban. The Administration remains committed to a stable and secure Afghanistan, and we remain convinced that a negotiated settlement between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban is the surest way to end the conflict – a conflict that has taken the lives of more than 2,200 brave American servicemen and women and caused immeasurable suffering to the people of Afghanistan.

The Government of National Unity, which came to power in the first peaceful and democratic transition of power in Afghanistan's

history, embodies the potential that Afghanistan has to thrive. It has weathered tremendous adversity in its first year, but retains its democratic mandate, and has demonstrated a commitment to be a partner with us in addressing our common security interests.

President Ghani recognizes the tough political choices required to achieve peace in Afghanistan. He traveled to Islamabad for the Heart of Asia Conference, during which he met with Pakistani leaders to promote regional counterterrorism initiatives and to discuss a way forward on a dialogue with the Taliban.

It is no secret that the bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been difficult, but President Ghani and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif have demonstrated true leadership in trying to bridge the divide.

Both sides show readiness to engage, to put past differences aside, and to build on the meeting in Murree, Pakistan, between Afghan government and Taliban representatives that took place in July of this year.

Now, the Taliban have a choice: to join good-faith negotiations for peace, or to continue to fight a war they cannot win and face the consequences.

A negotiated, Afghan-to-Afghan settlement, while difficult, is possible, and can be accomplished while preserving the gains made in education, health, and rights of women and minorities over the past decade. Afghanistan's constitution can support and integrate a diverse array of political perspectives. The constitution remains the foundation of a pluralistic republic that protects human rights—including women's rights—and provides for the future of

all its citizens while ensuring the country never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists.

Even as we push for progress on peace, the United States has a critical role to play in supporting continued development of Afghanistan's security capabilities. President Obama announced in October that we will maintain 9,800 troops in Afghanistan through the end of 2016 to train, advise, and assist Afghan forces.

American forces, together with NATO allies and operational partners, will help their Afghan partners become more effective in combatting the insurgency and protecting the Afghan people.

While Afghanistan has assumed responsibility for its own security, including in counter insurgency efforts, U.S. forces will continue to carry out a counterterrorism mission. The goal of this mission is to ensure that terrorists never again take advantage of Afghanistan

for safe haven to attack the United States or our allies in the region and beyond. We are working closely with the Afghan government to develop an enduring counter-terrorism partnership.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that we are pursuing the right course in Afghanistan, but I want to be candid about the great challenges that remain.

The security environment in Afghanistan remains volatile. As we expected, the Taliban mounted an aggressive campaign this year in an effort to exploit the drawdown of international forces. This year the Taliban took control of several district centers; launched large-scale attacks in a number of provincial capitals; and struck in the heart of Kabul.

We must, however, give credit to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces for demonstrating tenacity, ability, and resolve in countering these attacks. When the Taliban made gains during the year, as in Kunduz City, Afghan forces pushed them back.

U.S. forces provided some *in extremis* enabling support, but Afghan forces were – and remain – at the fore of the tactical fight.

At the same time, we must also recognize that Afghanistan cannot yet realize its full potential without the continued support of its international friends and allies—foremost the United States.

Despite tremendous development gains over the last decade, Afghanistan remains one of the poorest nations in the world, and the drawdown of international forces has further stressed what was already a weak economy.

We need to maintain our development assistance as we work to enable Afghanistan's young population to step forward and replace its artificial war economy.

It is important both for Afghanistan's economic and security prospects that we help the Afghan government restore public confidence in a brighter future.

We are already seeing large numbers of Afghans departing the country in hopes of finding opportunity in Europe and elsewhere. With them goes a wealth of human capital which Afghanistan's fledgling economy sorely needs. It is in our interest to help Afghanistan reverse this trend.

Over the past decade, U.S. assistance has made a significant and tangible difference in the lives of the Afghan people and has been



critical to maintaining its stability. Per capita GDP has more than quadrupled. For the first time, millions of Afghans have access to reliable electricity, health care, and independent media, and are connected to each other and the world through communications technology. According to the UN, we and other donors have helped Afghanistan achieve a greater increase in its standard of living over the last decade than almost any country on earth.

These gains have created a foundation for a more stable future in Afghanistan that will not only benefit the Afghan people, but will advance U.S. national security interests in a more peaceful region.

Mr. Chairman, with the continued support of Congress, we will build on this foundation and we will work to help Afghans address their challenges. We have a strong and enduring partnership with Afghanistan and it is in our interest to ensure that Afghanistan

succeeds in addressing the economic needs and aspirations of its people.

President Ghani shares our goal of making Afghanistan self-reliant.

As we work with President Ghani and his team on their economic agenda, we will not be working alone. We have a strong international network of partners who fully share our goals and are prepared to continue our common efforts in Afghanistan.

Next year, at the Warsaw NATO Summit in July and the Brussels Ministerial on Afghan Development in October we will have an opportunity to work with our international partners to lay out a plan for future security and economic assistance.

Our assistance does, however, come with clear conditions, and the concept of mutual accountability remains firmly in place. To justify our continued support, the government must deliver on the economic and governance reforms it committed to in the *Self Reliance Through Mutual Accountability Framework* that was adopted in Kabul in September. We will use the upcoming donor conferences coupled with the incentives under our New Development Partnership as action-forcing events to encourage Afghan progress on reform priorities including countering corruption; improving fiscal sustainability; and empowering Afghan women.

Advancing the fight against corruption will be of particular importance. Some positive steps have occurred: President Ghani, with the full support of CEO Abdullah, has adopted improved anti-money laundering regulations, charged corrupt judges,

established a National Procurement Commission, and fired corrupt government officials. This momentum must be maintained and more must be done.

Let me conclude by stressing again that our approach in Afghanistan involves hard work on several tracks. The peace process track cannot succeed unless it is paired with a strong and credible commitment to Afghanistan's security and to its economic priorities and to its political leadership. It will also require continued concerted engagement with our friends and partners in the region and beyond.

It will not be easy, but I look forward to working on these challenges with you and I am confident that with your continued support we have the ingredients in place to succeed.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your questions.

