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Testimony on the South Asia Strategy

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Good morning Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Cardin, and members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity to update you on the work currently underway by the Department of Defense to implement the South Asia Strategy. While still new to this portfolio, it is clear to me that the Pentagon is working diligently and in close coordination with our interagency partners to implement this strategy, which is already yielding important results.

Before I detail the Department's efforts, allow me to recall the strategic aims of this strategy, and why we remain in Afghanistan. South Asia is home to two nuclear-armed powers and to the highest concentration of U.S.-designated foreign terrorist groups in the world. On August 21, President Trump announced a new, integrated regional strategy for South Asia. As you are aware, this new strategy focuses primarily on the challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but recognizes that addressing these challenges effectively requires a broader regional approach. It seeks to discourage hedging behavior by regional states, puts pressure on the Taliban to join a peace process, and emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation to reduce the threat of terrorism and nuclear conflict. We are in Afghanistan to make America safer, to protect our citizens, and to ensure that Afghanistan and Pakistan do not serve as safe havens from which terrorists can support and launch attacks against our homeland, American citizens, and our allies. Now, more than ever, the United States' vision and leadership must remain clear and steady.

The strategy seeks to deliver greater stability in the region by focusing on the region as a whole, and shifting from a time-based approach to one based on conditions on the ground in Afghanistan. It is important that we send a strong message to all actors that the United States remains committed to the continued development of the Afghan security forces, and that we are focused on promoting a political settlement that protects the interests of the United States, Afghanistan, and our international partners.

We are focusing the Afghanistan portion of the South Asia Strategy on four key pillars: 1) ***regionalization*** aimed at enlisting the support of regional actors and enhancing overall regional stability; 2) ***reinforcement*** of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) capacity, capabilities and overall effectiveness; 3) ***realignment*** of U.S., coalition and Afghan resources; and 4) an Afghan-led peace process facilitating political settlement and ***reconciliation***. All of these critical pillars of the strategy are complementary, mutually supportive, and designed to integrate through a political, fiscal, and military sustainable model.

Regionalizing our approach will expand burden sharing, neutralize potential spoilers to U.S. efforts, limit threats to the United States and its allies, and develop and support a durable political settlement in Afghanistan. We are working closely with the State Department to ensure that regional partners and allies support our South Asia Strategy, and we are equally focused on minimizing malign influence in Afghanistan, particularly from Russia and Iran.

We have asked regional partners to leverage their relationships with Afghanistan and Pakistan to reinforce our calls for broader cooperation between the two countries. We are also relying on regional partners, such as India, to increase their economic and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. We have been very pleased with India's increase of non-lethal aid to Afghanistan, and continue to seek opportunities for burden sharing.

Our South Asia Strategy also reflects a shift in the U.S. approach to Pakistan. Pakistan is a long-standing and important partner, with deep historical ties to the U.S., and is key to the success of the President's South Asia strategy. America's interests are clear: we must stop the resurgence of safe havens that enable terrorists to threaten America, we must encourage restraint in Pakistan's nuclear weapons program and prevent nuclear weapons and materials from falling into the hands of terrorists. We must also encourage India and Pakistan to address tensions, in order to reduce the risk of nuclear war.

During Secretary of Defense Mattis's first trip to Pakistan in December, he engaged directly with Pakistani Chief of Army Staff Bajwa on the objectives of the South Asia Strategy. Secretary Mattis underscored that the United States appreciates Pakistan's significant sacrifices in the war against terrorism, and that Pakistan can play a vital role in working with the United States and others to facilitate a peace process in Afghanistan. He also stressed that we must see a change in Pakistan's behavior in the areas of greatest concern to the United States.

Since the announcement of the South Asia Strategy in August, Pakistan has taken some positive steps. The steps to date, however, do not reflect the type of decisive action that is necessary to restore regional stability. We continue to call on Pakistan to take decisive, sustained action against terrorist safe havens on its soil. DoD will continue to press Pakistan to make positive changes in its approach, and will provide clear and consistent feedback in response to Pakistani action or inaction. DoD wants to ensure that Pakistan has a "bridge back" to enhanced cooperation if it takes decisive action on U.S. requests.

Reinforcement involves improving the ANDSF's capabilities and effectiveness. Our goal is to increase ANDSF operational capabilities and expand their operational reach by providing advisory support and tailored equipment and training. We are focusing our efforts on areas where they lack key capabilities, such as aviation and intelligence. We will also expand the size and reach of high-performing organizations such as the Afghan Special Operations Forces. While NATO and Coalition partner uplifts will occur throughout 2018, the U.S. uplift is already well underway.

We expect progress to accelerate over the coming year, as senior DoD leaders engage with regional partners, enablers transition from Operation Inherent Resolve to Afghanistan, Afghan special forces recruiting and training increase, and the Afghan Air Force modernizes. DoD is evaluating ANDSF progress consistent with the Afghanistan Compact. The U.S.-NATO Coalition seeks increased Afghan government control of population centers, lines of communication, and key terrain; marked reduction in violence; dramatic increase in defense capabilities with Afghan Special Forces growth; and an increase in effective independent ANDSF operations.

We are simultaneously **realigning** U.S. military and civilian assistance and political outreach to target key areas under Afghan government control to coincide with our overall objectives. The majority of measures to realign authorities, resources, and the ANDSF are progressing on schedule.

Our major realignment initiatives include adjustments to operational and Train, Advise, Assist (TAA) authorities; reorganization of portions of the ANDSF to improve lethality and unity of effort; and shifting lethal and non-lethal resources from outside of Afghanistan into theater. The ANDSF Roadmap is an ambitious plan to reform and improve the Afghan security forces; it includes doubling the size of Afghan Special Forces, a modernization of the Afghan Air Force and transitioning it from Russian-made to U.S.-made aircraft, transitioning control of border and civil order police forces to the Ministry of Defense, and improving leader development through mandatory retirements and merit-based promotions.

Our next steps will include the deployment of the U.S. Security Force Assistance Brigade into the existing TAA structure and determining how TAA efforts at lower levels impact ANDSF effectiveness. We will continue to monitor and evaluate the progress of the ANDSF Roadmap initiatives, and evaluate the effectiveness of an Afghan National Army-Territorial Force pilot program.

The objective of the South Asia Strategy is a political settlement and **reconciliation** in Afghanistan. We seek to drive all major parties, including the Taliban, towards a political settlement in Afghanistan that ends the conflict, reduces violence, and denies safe haven to terrorist organizations. We will do everything we can to support the ANDSF fight against the Taliban in order to drive them to the negotiating table. Fundamentally, our goal is to convince the Taliban's senior leadership that its goals are better pursued through political negotiation rather than violence. We remain committed to working with all parties, including regional partners, to forge a durable and inclusive settlement to the war in Afghanistan.