

Executive Summary of Dr Maleeha Lodhi's Testimony

The Impact of Afghanistan on Pakistan

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today as a Pakistani citizen, not as a spokesperson for the government.

There is a line from Alice in Wonderland that is relevant to the situation in which the US and coalition forces find themselves in Afghanistan: "If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there."

What is the strategic objective that the US seeks to achieve in Afghanistan? President Obama has stated that it is to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al-Qaeda". The key question is whether to achieve this core goal is it also necessary to pursue other objectives: fighting the Taliban, nation building, and trying to establish a centralized state in Afghanistan?

The choice for the US should not be between an open-ended, escalating military engagement and "cut and run" from Afghanistan. Both could be disastrous. A precipitous withdrawal would repeat the strategic mistake of the 1990s when the US abandoned Afghanistan to the chaos that nurtured Al Qaeda. Open-ended military escalation risks trapping the West in a Vietnam-style quagmire: a war without end with no guarantee of success.

It is wise for this Committee to consider the impact of any option on Pakistan, which is, strategically, a much more critical country.

Pakistan's stability has been gravely undermined by the twin blowback from Afghanistan: first the Russian occupation which bequeathed a witches brew of militancy, weapons and drug proliferation and 3 million Afghan refugees; second the unintended consequences of the 2001 US intervention which pushed the conflict into Pakistan and further fuelled the forces of militancy.

The conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan are interlinked, but they are also distinct.

They are linked by the bonds of Pashtun ethnicity; a broadly shared ideology; common links to Al-Qaeda; two way cross border movement and some mutual support.

But the two insurgencies are also different in important ways.

The Afghan Taliban movement is older, more entrenched, has a command and control structure, broader geographical presence; a ‘national’ objective i.e. the ouster of foreign forces; and the confidence that it will outlast the alien presence.

In contrast, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is a loose conglomeration of a dozen groups with local origins, motives and ambitions. It is confined to part of the tribal areas that represent 3% of Pakistan’s territory and 2% of its population. It lacks command and control, especially after the death of its core group’s leader, Baitullah Mehsud.

It has been seriously disrupted by the Pakistan army’s effective operations in Swat, Bajaur and its military encirclement of South Waziristan. Most importantly Pakistani public sentiment has turned decisively against the TTP which today stands discredited.

This places Pakistan in a better position than coalition forces in Afghanistan to disrupt and eventually defeat the Pakistani Taliban. This reinforces an important principle of counter insurgency: indigenous forces are better able to conduct such missions successfully. But the continuing conflict in Afghanistan could provide new motivation and legitimacy to the TTP.

On the Afghan side, the coalition forces face a much greater challenge for several reasons including the fraud-stricken Presidential election but principally because foreign forces, as history attests, will find it difficult to quell an insurgency that portrays itself as fighting for a ‘national’ cause.

A further military escalation in Afghanistan is unlikely to succeed. Indeed it could be counterproductive for several reasons.

One, more troops will inevitably mean intensified combat even if the stated aim is to protect the population. The primary target – Al-Qaeda – can be neutralized in Afghanistan and in Pakistan’s border regions, if it is rejected and ejected by the

Taliban “sea” in which it survives. A military escalation will push the Taliban even closer to Al-Qaeda.

Two, even the enhanced troop levels envisaged will be insufficient to implement a “clear, hold and build” strategy. Seventy percent of Afghanistan has an active Taliban presence. The Soviets had 140,000 troops and a 100,000 professional Afghan army but could not defeat the Mujahideen.

Three, military escalation will likely lead to mounting Western casualties. The insurgents can absorb higher losses. Pakistan, for example, has sustained 7,500 killed and seriously injured. Can Western forces sustain such losses without eroding domestic public support?

Four, the war’s economic costs will also escalate. Will Western Parliaments, pre-occupied with economic recovery, agree indefinitely to defray the growing costs of an unending Afghan war?

Five, an escalating war will intensify regional rivalries among neighboring powers, already engaged in subterranean competition. Pakistan’s concerns about India’s role in Afghanistan are well known.

The impact of a surge and escalation will have negative consequences for Pakistan and its counter-insurgency campaign.

- 1) It will lead to a further influx of militants and Al-Qaeda fighters into Pakistan.
- 2) It will enhance the vulnerability of US-NATO ground supply routes through Pakistan, creating what military strategists call the “battle of the reverse front”. It will also overstretch Pakistan’s forces in having to protect the supply lines.
- 3) It would produce a spike in violent reprisals on “mainland” Pakistan.
- 4) It could lead to the influx of more Afghan refugees, with further destabilizing effects in the NWFP and Balochistan.
- 5) Most importantly, it could erode the present fragile political consensus in Pakistan to fight militancy.

Ofcourse, the alternative cannot be a unilateral withdrawal by US-coalition forces from Afghanistan. This will be viewed as a strategic defeat, embolden the forces of extremism across the world and strengthen the Al-Qaeda – Taliban alliance.

What I propose is a third path – a new, comprehensive strategy that can pave the way for an indigenous Afghan solution and create the conditions for a gradual US withdrawal in the best possible circumstances.

The military component of the new strategy should encompass:

- Hold ground in defensible military encampments and avoid higher casualties.
- Negotiate reciprocal cease fires, wherever possible, at the local level.

On the economic side, the focus should be on local development and job creation.

The political strategy should be the central thrust. This should aim to draw into the Afghan political process and integrate excluded Pashtun groups and those Taliban elements that can be de-coupled from Al Qaeda. Afghan leaders have often spoken about national reconciliation. What has been missing is a political framework within which serious negotiations can be pursued and meaningful incentives offered to the insurgents.

Talks with the insurgents, except Al-Qaeda should be opened, initially through intermediaries. What can be offered to them is: disavow Al-Qaeda, halt hostilities, support development, as well as the creation of ethnically balanced Afghan security forces in exchange for the progressive withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. This political strategy should seek to isolate and weaken the irreconcilable elements of the Taliban.

The main aim should be to establish a decentralized political order, that has existed historically in Afghanistan, and reflects the country's ethnic composition while protecting the rights of minorities.

If such arrangements within Afghanistan can be agreed and a regional compact forged to support this, a UN/OIC peacekeeping force, drawn from Muslim countries, could be inducted to implement this.

By its very nature, a comprehensive strategy will not be quick or easy. But it may be the best among the difficult options available.

A negotiated and progressive de-escalation in Afghanistan will be beneficial to Pakistan. It will further deflate the ideological appeal and political motivations of the TTP and other extremists.

I should however, underline that the prospects of Pakistan's long term stability cannot be viewed solely through the prism of Afghanistan. This will depend on a number of factors that are spelled out in my full testimony.