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Testimony of

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before the

**US House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs**

**“Afghanistan Policy at the Crossroads”
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*The views expressed here are my own and not those of the United States Institute of Peace.

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Mr. Chairman, ranking member, and members of the Committee.

I am Alex Thier, Director for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the U.S. Institute of Peace. Thank you for the opportunity to present my personal views on the way forward for the United States and Afghanistan.

My understanding of the potential and pitfalls of our policy choices in Afghanistan is based on intensive personal experience in the region over the last 16 years. Through four years on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the Afghan civil war in the 1990s, I witnessed the impact of war, warlordism, Talibanism, and abandonment by the West on Afghanistan and its neighbors. Afghanistan, its fabric of governance and society rent by war, became a breeding ground of Islamist extremism and global jihadists.

But I also came to know another Afghanistan, replete with moderate, hard-working men and women who want nothing more than a modicum of stability. Afghanistan is not some ungovernable, tribal society doomed to permanent conflict. Even during the war, thousands of community leaders worked to resolve conflicts and improve living standards for their people. After 2001, I worked with Afghan leaders intent on returning their country to the community of nations and creating a better future. Indeed, by some measures – growth of per capita income, access to basic health care and education, expansion of telecommunications – there have been some significant achievements over the last eight years. However, most of these advances are evaporating as Afghanistan’s instability grows.

We face four fundamental questions concerning U.S. policy towards Afghanistan:

- 1) Do we have national security interests in Afghanistan?
- 2) If so, do we have an effective strategy to secure and protect those interests?
- 3) Do we have the tools, resources, and partnerships in place to implement that strategy?
- 4) Is it worth the effort and investment?

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Ultimately, I believe that we have deeply compelling national security interests, and that our best strategy – albeit the best of a bad series of options – is to recommit ourselves to the stabilization of Afghanistan. As difficult as it will be to fulfill the promises we’ve made to the Afghans over the last eight years, the alternatives are far more dangerous, dispiriting, and unpredictable.

Despite setbacks, I believe that we know what success looks like in Afghanistan: when the path offered by the Afghan government in partnership with the international community is more attractive, more credible, and more legitimate than the path offered by the insurgents.

Do we have national security interests in Afghanistan?

In my opinion, the answer to this first question is the clearest. We face a stark array of certain and uncertain threats emanating from the network of militant Islamist groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan cross-border region. These include, but are not limited to, threats to the American homeland.

We continue to face a determined and resourceful enemy that sees this conflict in cosmic terms. Eight years after September 11, al Qaeda’s leaders have evaded capture and have managed to plan, or at least inspire, significant terror attacks and numerous other plots in major Western cities. While the planning, funding, training, and recruiting for future attacks may not necessarily happen in the Afghan-Pakistan border region, increased operating space for militants in that region will make it both easier and more likely.

In addition to these concerns, the consequences of instability in the region are also potentially enormous: the restoration of Taliban rule to some or all of Afghanistan and the return of regional proxy battles; the fall of more Pakistani territory to extremists; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; conflict between nuclear-armed Pakistan and India; the fraying of NATO; American isolationism and the global discounting of American power and reliability; resurgent Islamist movements in China and Central Asia, and the emboldening of both al Qaeda and the Iranian regime.

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Volatility in Afghanistan has a serious impact on Pakistan, and vice-versa. We maintain the fiction of the border, but the militants do not. They will use whatever territory is best available to them to accomplish their means. Between 1996 and 2001, al Qaeda had a virtually unfettered base in Afghanistan where they mixed ideologically, financially, and genetically with their Taliban hosts. From 2001 to 2009, the Afghan Taliban and elements of al Qaeda have been embedded in Pakistani militant culture and to some extent protected by elements of the Pakistani state. These elements have fed the growth of a virulent network of groups aiming to overthrow the Pakistani state, to gain access to weapons of mass destruction, to ignite internal sectarian conflict in India and conflict between India and Pakistan, to export jihad to other states in the region, and to attack the “far enemy” principally in the United States and the United Kingdom. It is also important to recognize that because every regional state has a stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan (notably India, China, Russia, Iran, and Uzbekistan), these states will continue to interfere in the politics of the region, especially if U.S. influence wanes.

Finally, the United States and NATO would also suffer a credibility crisis if the Taliban and al Qaeda can claim a military victory in Afghanistan. These factors are not independent variables – the lifespan of al Qaeda and Talibanism will be determined by the perceptions of populations of the region about the strength and righteousness of the militants. In 2001, the Taliban were not just weakened, but discredited. Similarly, the usefulness of NATO will be judged by the effectiveness and cohesiveness of the alliance in difficult circumstances.

Do we have an effective strategy to secure and protect those interests?

In March 2009, the Obama administration articulated a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan that promises increased resources for both Afghanistan and Pakistan, intended to stabilize both countries and eliminate the threat of terrorist organizations with transnational ambitions from operating there. These increased resources include the full gamut of tools of American power, including military, intelligence, diplomatic, assistance, and private sector resources. Principle questions about these efforts concern the method, scale, and focus of these inputs.

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I believe this strategy, which is not fundamentally a narrow counter-terrorism strategy, is sound in theory. Stabilization requires simultaneously addressing security, governance and the rule of law, and economic development. In the current context, where a robust insurgency is challenging Afghan state authority around the country, we need the tools to protect the Afghan population while assisting the Afghans to build the foundation of a sustainable state-society relationship. Afghan leadership in this effort is not only important, it is necessary. Without a sound, effective, and legitimate Afghan partner driving the process – and absorbing the costs – there is no chance of success.

In practice, creating a viable, legitimate government out of the ashes of decades of conflict is a low-probability undertaking, even in the best of circumstances. Everything can, and will, go wrong. Internationals will do too much, crowding out indigenous initiative, or too little, leaving the green shoots of renewal to wither. International troops will be seen as aggressive occupiers, or as ineffectual and value-neutral, failing to contain spoilers. A strong domestic leader will rile factional, ethnic, or sectarian divisions and a weak one will fail to unify in divisive times. A failure to deal with past abuses by powerful actors will undermine the possibility for reconciliation in society, or digging up the past will prevent the possibility for a stable political settlement. Indeed, every one of these charges has been made in Afghanistan in the last eight years.

Meanwhile, this strategy is being rolled-out in a year of deep uncertainty in the region and in U.S. policy. This uncertainty, on top of four years of deterioration in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, is creating a crisis of confidence among Afghans, Americans, and other troop contributing nations. This lack of confidence extends to questions of the competence and legitimacy of the Afghan government; whether the U.S. and the international community have the right overall strategy in Afghanistan; whether we can implement this strategy successfully; and whether we are going to remain in Afghanistan until our strategic objectives are met.

This crisis of confidence has caused many, including some Congressional leaders and high-level administration officials, to ask whether we should abandon the

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stabilization effort and instead focus more narrowly on destroying al Qaeda cells, mostly located in Pakistan. It is a deceptively attractive proposition: we do less and spend less to accomplish more. However, I think this perspective grossly underestimates the true threats to the United States posed by instability in the region, and grossly overestimates the ease of implementing an effective counter-terror strategy in the absence of a strong ground presence and reliable partners.

Do we have the tools, resources, and partnerships in place to implement that strategy?

In other words, even if we want to, can we stabilize Afghanistan? This is the most difficult question to answer. In 2001, the answer seemed clearly to be yes, if we made the necessary commitment. The Taliban, never popular with the majority of Afghans, collapsed rapidly, rejected even in their strongest bases of support. Dozens of nations offered material support and peacekeeping troops, and Afghan faction leaders were successfully induced to sign on to an uneasy but fair agreement that would govern a transition to stability.

But serious resources, including troops, aid, capacity building efforts, and political attention were lacking. In early 2002, there were 10,000 international forces in Afghanistan. Now there are in excess of 100,000. U.S. spending on the creation of a new Afghan National Army and Police – a centerpiece of our strategy from the start – was \$191 million in 2002. The 2010 request is \$7.5 billion.

At the same time, the Afghan government has not fulfilled its promise. No government that is unable to provide security to its population, and which is seen as corrupt and unjust, will be legitimate in the eyes of the population. It is this illegitimacy that has driven Afghans away from the government, and emboldened the insurgency. It is not so much that Afghans – even in the rural Pashtun heartland – have begun supporting the Taliban again, but that they are rejecting the government and are unwilling to bear risks to support it. The egregious fraud perpetrated in the August 2009 elections only serves to reinforce this cycle.

Thus, the focus of our efforts to stabilize Afghanistan should not be exclusively, or even primarily, military. Instead, the real key to success in Afghanistan will be

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to reinvigorate critical efforts to promote Afghan leadership and capacity at all levels of society while combating the culture of impunity that is undermining the entire effort.

After eight years, even a fully resourced strategy is not guaranteed to succeed. Illicit power structures, including warlords, narco-mafias and other criminal networks have become entrenched and intertwined with corrupt government officials. Political patronage, at the heart of the recent election fraud, is more powerful than those promoting reform. And our own record of delivering effective assistance programs does not always inspire confidence. A fraction of each dollar allocated actually makes it to the end user, and sometimes even then fails to have the desired impact. Positions funded to train Afghan police go unfilled, and some civilians sent out to mentor senior Afghans are far less qualified than those they are sent to assist.

To overcome these challenges, and our own limitations, we must do four things with our Afghan partners to rebalance our efforts: 1) radically prioritize what we want to accomplish; 2) address the culture of impunity and improve governance; 3) decentralize our efforts to reach the Afghan people; and 4) improve international coordination and effectiveness.

Prioritize: For too long we have been doing many things poorly instead of a few things well. In this critical year, it is essential to simultaneously scale back our objectives and intensify our resources. The U.S. and its partners should focus on security, governance and the rule of law, and delivery of basic economic development with a strong emphasis on agriculture.

Address Impunity and Improve Governance: Without a credible and legitimate Afghan partner, we cannot succeed no matter how significant the investment. The U.S. must act aggressively with its Afghan partners in the lead to break the cycle of impunity and corruption that is dragging all sides down and providing a hospitable environment for the insurgency. A few key steps should be taken immediately after the election to set a clear tone for the next Afghan government. First, the Afghan President should make a major speech indicating zero tolerance for corruption and criminality. Second, this demonstration of leadership should

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be accompanied by the empowerment of an anti-corruption and serious crimes task force, independent of the government agencies it may be investigating. The international community must devote intelligence and investigative support, as well as the manpower to support dangerous raids. In the first few months, several high profile cases including the removal and/or prosecution of officials engaged in criminality, including government officials, should be highly publicized. The U.S. should approach this mission with the same vigor as other key elements of the counter-insurgency campaign. Finally, the U.S. must put real effort into strengthening Afghan institutions that will be responsible for these matters over the long haul, giving them the capacity and tools they need to lead.

Decentralize: A top-down, Kabul-centric strategy to address governance and economic development is mismatched for Afghanistan, one of the most highly decentralized societies in the world. The international community and the Afghan government must engage the capacity of the broader Afghan society, making them the engine of progress rather than unwilling subjects of rapid change. The new formula is one where the central government continues to ensure security and justice on the national level and uses its position to channel international assistance to promote good governance and development at the community level.

Improve Aid Effectiveness: The U.S. must use its aid to leverage positive change, and must closely coordinate these efforts with international allies. This should include not just information sharing, but serious operational planning with Afghan government and allied officials. One critical point of leverage is to channel more aid through Afghan government institutions with stringent accountability mechanisms such as “dual key” trust funds that enable Afghan initiative while retaining oversight of spending. It is also essential to move spending to the provincial and local level, to build capacity of sub-national institutions and put more control over development resources into the hands of the recipients.

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Is it worth the effort and investment?

All things considered, is the continuation, or even expansion, of the American engagement in Afghanistan worth the investment?

I believe that answer is yes. The Afghan people, and those who have lived and worked among the Afghans, have not given up hope for a peaceful Afghanistan. In every part of the country there are Afghans risking their lives to educate and vaccinate children, to monitor elections and investigate war crimes, to grow food for their communities. They are not helpless without us, but they rely on us for the promise of a better future – a promise we have made repeatedly over the last eight years.

I understand that remaining committed to the stabilization of Afghanistan is not easy. It will be costly, in lives and taxpayer dollars. It is a challenging mission, in every way. Yet the alternatives, when examined honestly, are unbearably bleak. It is hard for me to imagine watching the Taliban’s triumphant return to Kandahar, or Kabul – sending Afghanistan back to the dark days of forced illiteracy for girls and public stonings. Are we prepared to witness Afghanistan’s women parliamentarians fleeing the country and thousands of our colleagues going into exile or face the consequences of having collaborated with the Americans? Will we stand by and observe the abandonment of hope as the next phase of the civil war begins and all our effort is swept away? And if future terror attacks are traced back to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, or Pakistani nuclear materials are stolen, how will we respond if asked: did we do everything we could to prevent it?