

The new U.S. Approach towards Afghanistan and the Region

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Thank you to the Task Force Afghanistan of the SPD Parliamentary Group, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik), and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation for putting together this workshop on a very current and important topic and for the kind invitation to speak to you. And thank you members of parliament, members of foundations, ladies and gentlemen, for coming here to discuss this important foreign policy topic.

We are here today to discuss how to make the international engagement in Afghanistan a more effective one, so that the Afghan people may prosper and also prevail in fighting al-Qaeda, the various Taliban, and other insurgents who ultimately are a threat to us all.

In order to address my general topic of the new U.S. approach towards Afghanistan and the region, I would like to:

1. Review the previous U.S. approach,
2. Discuss the new approach and how it differs from the previous approach, and
3. Outline areas for collaboration between the U.S. and its European allies.

Review of the previous U.S. approach

We all know the general outlines of the changes that have taken place in Afghanistan after the defeat of the Taliban in late 2001. The quick defeat of the Taliban was followed by a sense of optimism and hope. Despite the differences between the Northern Alliance factions and other Afghan groups represented at Petersburg,

a sense of optimism was palpable at the Petersburg meeting and in the Bonn Accords. The U.S. and other donors, along with NGOs, moved to restart the economy, open schools, and provide basic health care. Compared to the situation in the fall of 2001 there have been improvements in several sectors. There is now thriving media in Afghanistan where there was none before, thousands of girls are now going to school, there has been an improvement in several health indicators, and the economy is much better than it was in 2001.

The previous U.S. administration's approach was driven by this sense of optimism that achieving stability in Afghanistan was imminent, and would not require large-scale effort. Optimism drove the "light-foot approach" to state-building and allowed the US to ignore warning signals in Afghanistan as it focused on the "War on Terror," and, after the spring of 2003, concentrated on the war in Iraq. The rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan were thus under-resourced, under-manned, and the enormity of the task was underestimated from the onset. It is currently fashionable to make the historically determinant argument that Afghanistan has always been the "graveyard of empires." However, general domestic Afghan opinion towards the international presence was very different from previous cases of international intervention. Let us also not forget that when the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops arrived in early 2002, Afghans were urgently requesting an expansion of these forces beyond Kabul. It took another *two years* before the international forces did expand beyond Afghanistan's capital. And when they did expand, they expanded slowly, using the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) model, which largely limited security provision to urban areas and PRT camps. The hearts and minds of the Afghans were ours to win or lose. They were largely won in the optimistic, early years of this state-building effort. And they are starting to be lost now.

Optimism about the general security environment in Afghanistan and state-building also drove the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom's focus on what was determined to be the

largest threat to international and Afghan security: the remnants of al-Qaeda and Taliban in the southeastern parts of the country. The U.S. focus on terrorists in Afghanistan initially drove al-Qaeda, the Taliban and other anti-state actors over the border into Pakistan, where they found refuge. The pursuit of this anti-terrorist objective also led to cooperation with unsavory local strongmen, which ultimately created an environment that led to the resurgence of warlordism and banditry. Moreover, in an environment of weak rule of law and as some of these characters were then elected and appointed to government positions, the legitimacy of the embryonic state was undermined by the focus on al-Qaeda rather than on the general security of the country.

Moreover, with the advent of the war in Iraq in early 2003, the U.S. administration's attention shifted away from Afghanistan. The financial and human resources that were needed to consolidate the 2001 victory against the Taliban and their al-Qaeda backers were shifted to the effort in Iraq. This can be measured in terms of international soldiers per capita or local capacity-building in terms of Afghan security forces per capita - in either case, the security effort in Afghanistan was clearly under-resourced. Similarly, there was talk of state-building, but the resources devoted to actual programs - from building a functioning legal system, to developing the police force, to building any kind of civil service system - were dismal. The failure to focus on building these basic state institutions provided the context for the increased corruption, lawlessness, and general crisis of governance that we see in Afghanistan today.

The warning signs of a rising insurgency and governance crisis that have brought Afghanistan to the precipice today were, of course, evident already by 2003/2004. But as the U.S. became increasingly involved in Iraq, warning signals were ignored. Congressional funding requests lumped together Iraq and Afghanistan, glossing over the immense differences between U.S. efforts in these two countries. Moreover, the U.S. government's efforts in Afghanistan lacked a unified management structure, allowing inter-departmental rivalries to further detract attention from the warning signs.

The previous U.S. approach to Afghanistan thus gravely underestimated the effort that was needed to secure and help rebuild the Afghan state.

The new approach and how it differs from the previous approach

The new US administration of President Obama has come with a new strategy towards Afghanistan, as articulated in a recently released white paper and recent speeches by President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, and others. The core of the new strategy is to defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and in its havens in Pakistan. This strategy is supported by the following five objectives:

1. Disrupting terrorist networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan;
2. Promoting a more capable, accountable and effective government in Afghanistan with limited international support;
3. Developing self-reliant Afghan security forces;
4. Assisting efforts to enhance a civilian controlled and stable government in Pakistan; and
5. Involving the international community in addressing these objectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan with a leadership role for the United Nations.

How is this approach different from the previous U.S. policy towards Afghanistan and in what ways is it similar? Let me first turn to how this policy is a departure from the previous U.S. policy towards Afghanistan.

There are four key ways in which the new U.S. policy significantly differs from the old policy. These are:

1. Prioritizing Afghanistan as a main foreign policy issue;
2. Articulating an Afghanistan-Pakistan policy to focus attention on the cross-border and regional issue;
3. Highlighting the need for greater efforts on the civilian side in order to address the Afghanistan-internal impediments to state and security-building; and
4. Acknowledging the need for greater cooperation with other regional and global actors;

The first and most obvious difference is the prioritization of Afghanistan as one of the main, if not the main current foreign policy issue facing the United States. This changed prioritization is evident in the number of official strategy reviews conducted on this issue, the increased number of troops being sent to Afghanistan, while troops are being drawn down in Iraq, and the general increase in resources directed towards Afghanistan. The shift in troops away from Iraq

and towards Afghanistan is a clear reversal of the previous administration's priorities. President Obama recently ordered the deployment of 17,000 additional troops and 4,000 trainers for the Afghan National Army (ANA). This increase of 21,000 troops will lead to a U.S. military presence of about 68,000 troops by the fall of this year. The administration has also not ruled out a further increase in troop strength if the situation in Afghanistan necessitates it. Similarly, President Obama committed to a dramatic increase in what is becoming known as the "civilian surge" – committing more resources and manpower to the state-building effort.

Second, another clear departure from the previous policy has been the focus on what is becoming known as the "Af-Pak Policy". The renewed focus on Afghanistan has been accompanied by a simultaneous broadening of this focus to include Pakistan. Afghanistan and Pakistan now receive equal treatment in U.S. foreign policy – as evidenced by last Friday's Tokyo meeting of the "Friends of Democratic Pakistan" which garnered US\$5 billion for Pakistan to support its economy and help it fight off Islamic extremism. A special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan has been appointed. The White Paper's recommendations relate to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Secretary Clinton's comments at the Afghanistan conference in The Hague referred to a strategy for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Policy towards each of the two countries is now virtually treated as one.

Third, there is a much greater emphasis in the new policy on the need for greater resourcing and prioritizing of civilian assistance to Afghanistan in order to address the Afghanistan-internal impediments to state and security-building. The U.S. has recognized that the war in Afghanistan cannot be won by the military alone. Building on assessments that highlighted the weakness of political institutions, increasing corruption, and inability of the government to provide basic infrastructure and services in most parts of Afghanistan, the new U.S. policy sets out to provide more civilian expertise and financial resources to Afghanistan. Although the specifics are yet to be determined of how many civilians will comprise this new "civilian surge" or how the increased civilian assistance is to be structured, a general refocus of policy on the civilian aspect of assistance is evident.

Fourth, the new U.S. strategy clearly acknowledges the need and seeks the help of regional and global allies. In the White Paper and in official comments since the release of the new strategy, the U.S. has clearly articulated that it seeks political and financial assistance from

international allies and from Afghanistan's neighbors in accomplishing shared objectives in Afghanistan. The two most noticeable aspects of this is a much greater focus on Pakistan and a reaching out to Iran. Iran played a constructive role in Afghanistan particularly in the immediate aftermath of the Bonn conference. The invitation of Iran to the conference in The Hague, but also recent discussions to supply U.S. forces in Afghanistan by overland routes from Iranian ports on the Persian Gulf, are evidence of a recognition that the Iranians also share the U.S. and international interest in achieving a stable Afghanistan. European allies are also asked to help politically and financially in the shared objective of securing Afghanistan from al Qaeda, Taliban and other insurgents.

However, while the new U.S. policy towards Afghanistan differs in many of these crucial respects from the previous U.S. policy, there are two major areas of where there is continuation.

First, the main goal is still to defeat al Qaeda and pursue the "war on terror" in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. This goal has led to a focus on Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal areas (FATA), neglecting the province of Baluchistan. There are several issues. Al-Qaeda has a presence in the FATA areas of Pakistan, but it is also present in other parts of the world. Moreover, while the policy has been successful in eliminating many Al-Qaeda operatives in this area, the civilians killed in pursuit of operatives have angered the local population, thereby possibly providing new recruits. Finally, the U.S. is addressing the symptom rather than the cause of Al Qaeda finding refuge in Afghanistan. It was a Taliban regime that hosted Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. And it is widely known that the Taliban shura is located in Baluchistan and that the Taliban/insurgency/opium nexus is strongest in the border areas of Helmand and Baluchistan provinces.

The second way in which the new policy is a continuation of the previous policy is that the U.S. still bears a major part of the burden of the efforts in Afghanistan. This is largely because others – European partners, NATO allies and regional allies – have not stepped up to the plate. Yet the U.S. faces the same domestic constraints faced by most allies. The war in Afghanistan might be seen by many in the U.S. as the "right war," but it is not a popular war. Increasingly, elected representatives of the U.S. polity are starting to ask the administration what the exit strategy is, what the time horizon is in Afghanistan, because they in turn have to justify to their constituents the lives of young men and women lost in Afghanistan. Despite these grave

costs, President Obama and the administration's policy towards Afghanistan is that past mistakes will not be repeated. The U.S. will not abandon Afghanistan as it did in the late 1980s/early 1990s, leaving the country to descend into civil war and thereby enabling the rise of the Taliban, which in turn gave refuge to Al Qaeda. However, in order to prevent this happening, it needs the help of its friends and allies.

Areas for collaboration between the U.S. and its European allies in their common efforts to rebuild Afghanistan

As President Obama pointed out, "the world cannot afford the price that will come due if Afghanistan slides back into chaos." And as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointed out in The Hague: "While there is great temptation to retreat inward in these difficult economic times, it is precisely at such moments that we must redouble our effort...and we must all be willing to coordinate those efforts together."

The new U.S. policy towards Afghanistan asks its European allies to help in the efforts to secure and rebuild Afghanistan. Help is needed in the form of more troops on the ground, more financial resources towards building institutions and funding social development and basic infrastructure, more technical expertise to train Afghan police, civil servants and many others. Some areas requiring attention and funding are more immediate, like the upcoming Afghan elections. Others, such as educating children, are a long-term endeavor, requiring a long time horizon. But both short-term and long-term investments are needed if the endeavor in Afghanistan is indeed to be pulled back from the precipice. It is unlikely that the U.S. and its allies will come up with an equivalent of the Marshall Plan for Afghanistan. But we owe it to the Afghan people and to the security of the international community to do as much as we can.

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