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Third Plenary: Alternative Futures for Afghanistan and the Stability of Southwest Asia

**Keynote Speech by
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National Consolidation and Security in Afghanistan and the Region**

H.E. Ambassador Guenter Overfeld,
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted and honored to address this distinguished gathering as part of the EastWest Institute's Seventh Worldwide Security Conference. I take this opportunity to thank the organizers for inviting me, and providing the opportunity to share my views and experiences on the important issue of "National Consolidation and Security in Afghanistan and the Region."

At last month's London conference, the international community re-affirmed its support for building indigenous capacity to enhance security, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan. This commitment is a recognition that the growing violence in Afghanistan and the concomitant instability in Pakistan has serious consequences for the region and beyond. As Admiral Mullen recently told a U.S. Senate panel "the outcome of today's conflicts will shape the global security environment for decades to come."

The current situation in Afghanistan is an inevitable result of previous domestic and international responses to the country's political and security challenges. The Taliban were removed from power, but not defeated. Neither the group's internal ability to reconstitute itself or its external support was addressed. The co-option of notorious human rights violators after the Taliban's defeat perpetuated their malign influence in the long-term, while achieving only short-term tactical gains in stabilizing the country. Additionally, insurgents, criminal networks, freebooters, and domestic and foreign opportunists filled the vacuum that was created by the inadequate deployment of international troops, and the slow development of Afghan state institutions.

Afghanistan's enormous challenges cannot now be solved purely through Western arms and money, especially if delivered in an uncoordinated and haphazard manner. The local, regional and global dimensions of the Afghan conflict are inextricably intertwined and require an integrated strategy and international partnership. However, as the experiences of the past nine years indicate, unifying the efforts and coordinating the actions of stake holders with uneven capacities and divergent political concerns, in a highly volatile and dynamic environment, has so far proved elusive. The key to future success is a shared vision for the end state in Afghanistan, and the building of indigenous capacity to achieve this goal.

It is thus quite understandable that the London Conference dwelled on the Afghanization of stability operations, the reconciliation of insurgents, and the development of governance capacity. These efforts are necessary to facilitate the handover of security responsibilities from

foreign to Afghan forces. However the success of such a strategy depends on resources, sound Afghan leadership, coordinated international partnership, and most importantly time.

The next 12 to 18 months will be critical for reversing the insurgents' momentum and consolidating security gains. The ongoing military operation in Helmand Province can hopefully become a microcosm and a test of this new approach. The goal of the current operation in Helmand's Marjah community is to clear the area of insurgents so that the Afghan Government can re-establish a presence, bringing security, the rule of law, good governance and development. It is expected that over time, such services will undermine the appeal of the Taliban among the population and lure them away from the insurgents

Tackling the insurgency in Afghanistan requires two sets of mutually reinforcing measures. First of all it is necessary to reduce the threat level and secondly to build and mobilize effective Afghan leadership capacities and Afghan ownership of stabilization and development efforts. The main obstacles to achieving this are ineffective and corrupt governance, difficulties in expanding the quantity and quality of Afghan security forces, and the diverging strategic interests of Afghanistan's neighbors. In the rest of this speech I will try to focus on these challenges, and alternative ways to respond to them.

Reintegration and Reconciliation

As is often stated, reducing the threat level requires separating the committed insurgents from the rest of the population. The true test of the London conference approach will come when troops move from 'clearing' insurgents to 'holding' territory and 'building' security. To be effective, the enlarged ISAF deployments in Afghanistan must provide security for the population not principally by fighting the Taliban, but instead by preventing the Taliban from coercing or communicating with the population.

To achieve this, there must be a successful reconciliation and reintegration of less ideologically zealous fighters, and a regional cooperation plan that limits the foreign support for insurgents. Providing a way for individuals to rejoin a law-abiding society will be at least as important as any military operations to kill or capture opponents of the government.

The key to stabilization is curbing the ability and desire of insurgents to continue the violence, while simultaneously creating a national capacity to transform war-torn structures into peacebuilding institutions. This process involves constructing a credible legal and political system, reestablishing public confidence in state institutions, and shifting from a culture of violent opposition to one of peaceful competition for power and influence.

Despite the stated commitment of the Afghan government to national reconciliation with the Taliban and other insurgents, the process so far has been void of strategic vision, clarity of parameters and unity of effort. Rhetoric has been more prominent than substance. There has been no clarity about whom to talk to, what political cost is acceptable to achieve peace and what kind of an end state is envisioned. Attempts by different Afghan and foreign actors to engage the insurgents have lacked transparency, and been fragmented, uncoordinated, transient, and often counter-productive.

The potential for a grand peace deal is limited by the competing interests of domestic, regional and international actors vested in Afghanistan. Local deals may be achievable, but can only be initiated in an environment conducive to fruitful negotiations. There must be incentives for the opposition to talk, in the hopes of gaining what cannot be achieved through violence. Currently such conditions exist only in some localized areas. The reconciliation process should be pursued only where the relative dominance of the government makes negotiation worthwhile.

While there is a need for pursuing a reconciliation process it cannot succeed unless a favorable regional environment is created. This requires integrating the peace process into a unified counterinsurgency strategy among all stakeholders. Building a sustainable peace requires joint efforts by Afghanistan and Pakistan, supported by the international community, to tackle extremism both militarily and ideologically.

As President Karzai said after the London conference "... A successful reconciliation program must have two main components: Reintegration and reconciliation. The reintegration is for the thousands of Taliban soldiers and village boys in our country who have been driven out of their homes -- either by fair means or by intimidation, by bad behavior on the part of NATO forces or by bad behavior from Afghan forces -- and who do not stand ideologically against the Afghan people or the international community. They must be persuaded by all means to return. (...) Then there is the political structure of the Taliban, which has its own environment of relations with the rest of the world and the question of al-Qaida and the terrorist networks. Our neighbors and the international community will be involved in this. That's going to take a lot more effort."

Regional Co-operation

Afghanistan's neighbors and other regional powers can be both obstacles and solutions to the country's problems. Progress requires stability in Afghanistan to be seen as an extension of other nations' strategic priorities. Openness and cooperation with regional powers offer the best prospects for security and economic progress. However, no regional approach can be fully effective without the influence of major outside powers (NATO, U.S. etc) that are involved in the region.

Five points are of key importance:

- Regional interference and intervention in Afghanistan will continue as long as the country remains unstable. An improved level of stability in Afghanistan can offer incentives for wider regional cooperation
- Little progress in regional security cooperation is expected unless there is progress on the bi-lateral tracks
- Afghanistan's capacity to overcome its political and economic problems is unavoidably linked to the strength of its regional relationships.
- Afghanistan's bi-lateral relationships with Iran and Pakistan are closely influenced by their attitudes towards the United States and India's involvement in the region. Whether these neighbors cooperate or create obstacles for Afghanistan's recovery is greatly influenced by American strategic policies in the region, Iran's problems with the U.S and Pakistan's disputes with India.

- Finally, the perception that U.S. interest in Afghanistan and the region is fading drives domestic opposition forces and regional views of the Karzai regime.

Building Indigenous Capacity" Afghanization"

Simultaneous to reducing overall insecurity through a regional approach, efforts must be expanded on a second set of measures aimed at building Afghan capacity to govern. Building indigenous capacity for efficient, effective service delivery and economic development is the only viable long-term strategy to ensure stability. However, constructing a nearly 172,000 strong ANA and 134,000 strong ANP by 2011 - as envisaged by Afghanistan Government and its international partners - is an overly ambitious and unrealistic program. The obstacles include recruitment problems, illiteracy of recruits, poor professional leadership, a low quality officer corps, desertion and drug addiction problems, competing factional and ethnic loyalties, corruption, retention issues and the long-term sustainability of such a force. Therefore, it is hardly expected that the Afghan government institutions including the INSF will be ready to take over security responsibility by the summer of 2011 which is marked as the beginning of U.S. forces drawdown. Such a timetable can also be interpreted by the Taliban, al-Qaeda and their supporters as a sign of flagging commitment hindering reconciliation and regional cooperation. Any timetable, therefore, needs to be tied to ground realities in the region.

The immediate focus must be on training Afghan police to a high enough standard of professionalism and discipline that they are able to defend themselves against insurgent attacks. The inadequate training of police forces, and the resultant high casualty rates they sustain in battle, contributes to a poor retention rate of officers in a force that will need to expand significantly in size and capability in order to meet its challenges.

Meanwhile the situation dictates that soldiers must learn how to be police, and police must learn how to fight like soldiers. Traditional police functions relating to upholding justice and the rule of law cannot be effectively performed amidst severe insecurity. Until conducive conditions emerge, police will inevitably function primarily as a security, rather than an investigative, force. Police work in Afghanistan should be understood as fulfilling two key aspects of the counterinsurgency plan. A paramilitary police force (or gendarmerie) must be assigned to do the "holding" of cleared areas and other heavy-duty police. This must be balanced as far as possible with purely civilian police work to uphold the rule of law and protect the population against crime. The concept of upholding the rule of law has been too frequently ignored in Afghanistan, by politicians and military strategists alike.

The notion of government legitimacy and the rule of law are particularly important when considering calls for enlisting cooperation of local communities in fighting insurgency and facilitating local security. Traditionally local communities have complemented efforts by Afghan governments to enhance security. However such collaboration has been possible only when the communities believed in the political and structural legitimacy of the central government, its viability and sustained capacity to deliver services.

In many areas this social compact has been transformed during years of war and displacement. Traditional leaders and tribal structures have been sidelined, replaced by men with guns, money and links to extremist and criminal networks. In such an environment arming purported tribes to

face the insurgency cannot work as it did in Iraq. Attempts in the recent past to arm communities led to the emergence of unregulated militias. In the absence of full government control, these militias not only sharpened ethnic frictions but also got involved in criminal activities, terrorized populations and undermined the very rule of law they were supposed to protect.

Governance

Afghanistan's transition from conflict to peace demands the creation of a set of institutions, capacities, resources and provisions for the rule of law. Success will be defined by the Afghan government's ability to control territory, win the trust of the people and prevent infiltration and subversion from abroad.

However, more than six months after the Presidential elections, the Government is yet to form a full cabinet, and ongoing tension between the executive and legislative branches of the government undermines government effectiveness. Civil society is dangerously excluded from major policy decisions. Significant portions of the country have a limited or non-existent government presence, and some areas are completely controlled and governed by the Taliban. The government's reputation for bribery and inefficiency has led many Afghans, and members of the international community, to simply bypass it.

In his speech in London President Karzai stressed the importance of reforming state institutions, and fighting corruption. He also emphasized the need to better integrate traditional institutions of voluntary cooperation and dispute resolution. "Engaging our elders and Ulema in decision-making at all societal levels" he said "can lead to speedy and less costly resolution of disputes. Empowerment of local councils makes our development projects more demand-oriented and cost effective." Our approach to good governance is expanding the reach of the central government to the remotest parts of the county as well as building up systems of governance at the village level.

We expect the international community to support us in these vital endeavors." All these are good words but unless the institutional legitimacy and effectiveness of the government is established it will be hard to mobilize traditional institutions in the interest of good governance.

The focus of the upcoming Kabul Conference should be democratic accountability, equality, human rights, gender equality, good governance and economic growth. It is quite clear that business as usual won't help. There has to be changes in the conduct of the Afghan government and both the type and level of support offered by the international community.

To stabilize Afghanistan, the capacity of the Afghan society must be mobilized to achieve what the people aspire for, not what is imposed on them through supply-driven assistance. There is a debate whether the change can come through a centralized government from the top or through local approach from the bottom. It is not this or that, but both. The process at Bonn started with a tacit bottom up approach, allowing regional strongmen and warlords to seize power in the provinces and operate independently. To counter this excessive decentralization the constitution adopted in 2004 introduced a strong centralized government that failed to respond to local needs. There is a need to fine-tune the balance of power, between the center and the peripheries. The basic unit of reconstruction is the "District", and this should be reflected in power and budgetary responsibility.

Conclusions

For the Afghan people, and thus for the government and its international supporters, the current security situation is untenable. Renewed International attention offers a vital opportunity to reverse the course of the conflict. Failure to address the inadequacies of the government in the areas of justice provision, welfare and public service delivery, institutional transparency and probity, and most importantly security, will soon fundamentally undermine the legitimacy of state authority. Unless the Afghan people are given substantial and sustained reasons for supporting government institutions, they will understandably not be prepared to risk the violent reprisals of insurgents. However, if the Afghan government and its partners can provide basic security and minimal development impetus then the Taliban will become increasingly irrelevant and marginalized. Their ideology and their governance are not popular, but through intimidation, coercion, bribery and propaganda they are currently able to fill the vacuum of authority that exists in much of the country. Optimistic but pragmatic, and fed up with rhetoric and empty promises, Afghans need change they can believe in.

Let me conclude with a statement of a 3rd century Chinese Taoist philosopher Jug Ling who said:

"Those who governed well did not arm; those who were armed well did not draw battle lines; those who drew battle lines well did not fight; those who fought well did not lose; those who lost well did not perish."