

Statement of Ambassador Douglas Lute
Hearing: "The Afghanistan Papers – Costs and Benefits of America's Longest War"
Federal Spending Oversight Subcommittee of the Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs
United States Senate
February 11, 2020

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, thank you for this opportunity to appear today to discuss the war in Afghanistan. In this statement I will briefly outline my views on the vital U.S. interests at stake, the current situation, and one potential way forward.

In my view, the only vital national interest at stake in Afghanistan is to counter terrorist groups that have the potential to strike the United States, its citizens and its treaty allies. Indeed, this purpose mirrors the original purpose of our intervention just weeks after 9-11 in 2001, and it remains the core reason for our effort over the past 18 years. Of course, we have other, less than vital interests in Afghanistan which this committee may wish to discuss, but the essential purpose for the United States is to counter terrorism.

In my estimation, we have largely achieved our counter-terrorism objective today. Al-Qa'ida is much diminished in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with most of its senior leaders killed and those who remain marginalized. The threat from al-Qa'ida and its affiliates is greater elsewhere, including Yemen, Somalia, and Syria. There is a branch of the so-called Islamic State in Afghanistan, but I have seen no evidence that it presents a threat to the U.S. and it is under pressure from the Afghans, including from the Taliban. This potential threat should be monitored.

The situation today is a stalemate in three dimensions. First, the security situation is stalemated with neither the Taliban nor the Afghan Government (with our support) able to significantly change the control of territory or the population. In rough terms, the government controls the major population centers, and the Taliban control much of the countryside, especially in the Pashtun south and east. There is little either side can do to alter this stalemate. Second, Afghan politics are stalemated, with the results of the September 2019 elections still not revealed, and the main political factions unwilling to compromise. Third, the talks between the United States and the Taliban are not moving forward, largely because the United States has insufficient leverage and the Taliban are unwilling to make the compromises the United States is demanding for fear of losing cohesion in their ranks.

Sustaining this stalemate is expensive. Most significant, Afghans are dying and suffering more than at any time since 2001, including an increasing number from U.S. and Afghan Government operations. The United States retains approximately 13,000 troops in Afghanistan, joined by about 6000 from allies and partners. While casualties are much reduced from the peak of U.S. presence in 2010-11, we lost more than 20 soldiers last year. This troop presence costs about \$50 billion per year, a significant opportunity cost, given the other demands the Pentagon faces. Afghanistan also receives one of the largest U.S. economic assistance packages. Today's stalemate is expensive.

My main point today is that U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is out of alignment. Strategy can be defined as the alignment -- over time -- of ends, ways, and means. Ends are the objectives, ways

the methods of achieving the objectives, and means the resources required. When these three elements are aligned, a strategy is viable. My view is that in Afghanistan we have narrow counter-terrorism objectives that can be achieved by alternative methods and that do not justify the expensive resources we are committing today. Our strategy is out of alignment. In my view, U.S. objectives have rightly narrowed over time since the peak in 2010-11, and today these objectives have been significantly achieved, but we still persist in using largely unproductive methods and committing out-sized resources – all to sustain a manifest stalemate at considerable cost.

This Committee asked for my thoughts on the way ahead. I recommend the United States prioritize politics and diplomacy to move toward compromises that end the war in Afghanistan. More specifically, a comprehensive political outcome requires compromises among the Afghan political elite to reform and govern inclusively; compromises in the ongoing talks between the United States and the Taliban; and sustained diplomacy to secure support from Afghanistan's neighbors especially Pakistan and Iran, and others including Russia, China, India and the Gulf states. U.S. economic support to Afghanistan should be conditioned on progress by the Afghan Government. In the talks with the Taliban, the United States should focus on the counter-terrorism objective, and ensure verification that any deal is implemented as agreed. Afghanistan's neighbors must understand that while we have narrow interests, their own security interests are at risk until Afghanistan stabilizes. Finally, the United States should engage our allies to support this main political-diplomatic effort, including by extending economic assistance only to an inclusive Afghan Government.

At the same time, to continue to secure our vital interest, the U.S. should develop alternatives to the current counter-terrorism methods, including enhancing the most capable Afghan forces, intelligence gathering that does not rely on a costly U.S. troop presence, and off-shore basing for U.S. forces, for example in bases in the Persian Gulf.

What I am describing differs from our current approach that aims indefinitely to support unsustainably large Afghan security forces and the Afghan Government that struggles to be inclusive and combat corruption. These adjustments -- both political and military -- can bring U.S. strategy into alignment, sustaining our vital national interest while dramatically reducing the costs of U.S. troop presence. In short, we can do better than sustaining the current stalemate.

A final note of caution: there is a potential outcome to this war that is worse than the current stalemate. An uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal in the absence of the kind of political and diplomatic progress I have outlined will likely lead to civil war, the collapse of the Afghan state, and irresistible opening for transnational terrorists to widen their reach – conditions that define Afghanistan in the years leading up to 9-11.

Thank you. I am ready to respond to your questions.