

Testimony by Mark L. Schneider, Senior Vice President, International Crisis Group to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia on “Strategic Chaos and Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan”

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I want to express once again the appreciation of the International Crisis Group for this committee’s continuing attention to the “other war,” the continuing conflict in Afghanistan, where al Qaeda launched its attack on the United States 6 ½ years ago.

You have aptly entitled today’s hearing “Strategic Chaos and Taliban Resurgence.” To a considerable degree, the absence of strategic coherence has been a powerful enabler of that resurgence. Your timing also is admirable since a major opportunity to rescue Afghanistan from chaos begins this evening in Bucharest at the NATO Summit.

Resurgence

The Taliban resurgence can be measured quantitatively or qualitatively.

With respect to the former:

--Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified earlier this year that suicide bombings were up 27% in 2007 over 2006. He should have added that they are up 600% over 2005; and that all insurgent attacks are up 400% over 2005.

--The UN Secretary General reported last month the looting of 40 convoys delivering food for the World Food Programme (WFP) in 2007, 130 attacks against humanitarian programs, 40 relief workers killed and another 89 abducted.

--There were 8000 conflict-related deaths in 2007, 1500 of them civilian.

On the qualitative side, the Serena Hotel in the center of Kabul, where I stayed last fall, was the subject of a fierce attack with automatic weapons and explosives in mid-January during the stay there by the Norwegian Foreign Minister. The Afghan opposition spokesman with whom I met during my visit, Sayed Mustafa Kazemi, went to inaugurate a sugar factory in Northern Afghanistan a few days later and he and around 70 others were killed in a suicide bombing. Probably the single worst suicide bombing since 2001 occurred in February of this year with dozens killed and nearly a hundred wounded in the southern province of Kandahar.

The Taliban and associated groups are using terror tactics to spread fear far from their heartland in the southern and eastern provinces bordering Pakistan, where NATO and US forces battle them in nearly daily combat.

Opium poppy cultivation and production, which fuels both corruption within the Afghanistan government and is taxed by the Taliban to supply their own financial needs,

has reached all-time highs. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that in 2007 Afghanistan produced 93% of the world's opium, on 193,000 hectares with a potential production of 8,200 metric tons. In February 2008, in its winter rapid assessment survey as to what is likely to happen this year, it essentially said "about the same."

Even more worrisome is the finding that opium poppy production in the southern and western provinces, many of the same areas that are the core battlefield of the insurgency, show a likely increase in opium over last year when they already constituted 78% of Afghan poppy cultivation. In its survey, the UN found that 100% of the poppy farmers in the southern region reported being forced to pay taxes on the opium to various groups and 72% in the western region. The majority of those taxes are paid to the Taliban, to mullahs and to local militia commanders.

The current state of affairs was not inevitable. It resulted from policy choices early on in the international community; light military and political footprints with the co-opting of local and all too frequently corrupt militia leaders rather than international boots on the ground. There was a failure to get UNSC-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) out into the provinces. In 2002, Crisis Group was arguing for a peacekeeping force of 25,000 to 30,000. Instead, there were 4,500 ISAF troops confined to Kabul. There was no reassessment of strategic alliances in Pakistan to ensure the Taliban sanctuaries across the border were closed down.

Strategic coherence

Today the lack of strategic coherence within the international community effort is reflected in separate civilian special representatives of the United Nations, of the European Union and of NATO, with no clear authority one over the other; and in a reluctance on the part of the United States and other major country contributors to be coordinated by any one of them.

On the military side there remains the US led Coalition Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) undertaking training of local security forces as well as its own operations, with separate commands, reporting to EUCOM and to NATO, reporting to CENTCOM and at least one reporting to the Special Operations command in Tampa.

The NATO-led ISAF has 40 contributing nations acting under a UNSC mandate and NATO command with five regional commands and 26 national-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT's) underneath it. Many of the nations involved have national caveats that restrict where the ISAF commander can send his troops and what they can be required to do. This means that the burden of risk and casualties is unevenly borne by the U.S., UK, Canada, the Netherlands and others whose forces are permitted to go to the areas of heavy fighting.

The PRT's were established with the reasonable purpose of the military being able to provide some direct community benefits where insecurity prevented other, more

appropriate, civilian actors from doing so. But there are serious questions about the use of PRT's as instruments to achieve the wider goal of national development. While one could argue that differing local conditions may require flexibility in defining activities in a province, except for the 12-U.S. run PRT's, there is little commonality among them and they operate without any transparent or common doctrine or even reporting lines for non-military actions.

The PRT's may provide some capacity to undertake efforts in insecure provinces; however, many of the areas where the PRT's operate are no longer high risk security. Reconstruction and development are not the role, responsibility, or comparative advantage of the military. In more stable areas, Afghanistan civilian agencies with their international civilian counterparts should be in the lead. Yet, there are no agreed-upon benchmarks for determining when that transition can take place and when it should take place. Today, the PRT's often seem a supply-driven phenomenon, a way for nations to fly their flag in Afghanistan, but with little evaluation as to comparative impact or effectiveness.

Such an approach, particularly without strong civilian leadership, has meant a lack of a comprehensive international cooperation strategy. Instead, each country involved often appears to see Afghanistan largely through the lens of where they are based---the UK sees Helmand as Afghanistan; the Dutch, Uruzgan; and Germany, northern Afghanistan.

The lead nation approach to security sector reform has added to the stove-piped nature of the response so that, except for the fledgling Afghan National Army, with the U.S. as the lead nation, the other elements in the security structure---police, judiciary, prisons---remain largely dysfunctional. Today, the Ministry of the Interior, which stands at the heart of all these efforts, is receiving much greater attention than before but remains largely unreformed. Ensuring much greater – and coordinated – improvements in all of those elements is crucial to a functioning criminal justice system that assures the safety of Afghan civilians.

The situation with respect to the police underscores the problem of coordination. What began with a German-led effort to create a new professional civilian-led officer corps simply did not produce the numbers needed and saw local powerbrokers seize the title of police commanders. Many of these men had backgrounds including both human rights abuses and drug trafficking linkages. The U.S. inserted itself to remedy that situation and fairly rapidly pumped out 70,000 field-level “beat” patrolmen—most with two weeks training—who were inserted back under a mostly unreformed command structure.

Now the European Union has taken the nominal international lead; but its members have produced only 200 police trainers. The U.S. has 500 contracted police trainers---again a less than ideal management arrangement---and 700 military police trainers. The effort is being managed by a U.S. Major General who is now seeking to go district-by-district to make-over the police, including new training programs. But once again, it is not fully clear that the plan has the endorsement of the rest of the international community, let alone all elements of the Afghan government. There are fears that the U.S. still sees

police reform primarily as a counter insurgency measure, with a consequent focus on militarizing the police as opposed to the European civilian law enforcement approach.

Without once again taking the committee through the opium poppy problem, conflicting policy views exist on how best to control illicit narcotics. We continue to believe that political will on the part of the Karzai government to halt drug trafficking and to prosecute all officials linked to drug trafficking is the prerequisite for success. The U. S. Ambassador still is wildly enthusiastic about aerial eradication despite the opposition of the Afghan government and of other nations, but fortunately their objections thus far have prevailed. The reality is that U.S. use of aerial eradication in Colombia also failed to reduce the supply of cocaine, but its negative consequences with respect to population displacement and alienation of local farmers would seem likely to be even more extreme in the Afghanistan environment. They are, after all, communities with unhappy memories of Soviet helicopter gunships.

Staying the Course

Despite these serious concerns---and it seems much better to acknowledge their existence than to ignore them---the U.S. and the international community must stay the peacebuilding course in Afghanistan. But they must do it better. The potential costs of failing to increase resources, attention, priority and energy to Afghanistan would be unacceptably high:

- a return to civil war, with factions divided along regional and ethnic lines
- a narco-state with institutions controlled by organized criminal gangs and influenced by terrorists
- a Pashtun-dominated south largely abandoned to extremist lawlessness
- increased intervention by regional powers

That is why the Crisis Group would hope that the NATO summit in Bucharest starting tonight and the forthcoming donors meeting in June in Paris will adopt a fundamental course correction with respect to international coordination. It will mean critically reviewing the degree to which NATO countries, donors and the Karzai government have kept faith with the Afghanistan Compact.

The Afghanistan Compact adopted following the London conference in January 2006 together with the interim-Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) was to be a partnership of some 60 nations and institutions in support of Afghanistan. But the agreed priorities and resource allocation by contributors have not been met.

Equally if not more serious, the Afghan Government has not been held accountable to its commitments on disarmament, transitional justice and human rights, and anti-corruption. The creation and demise of the Special Consultative Board for Senior Government Appointments, part of the Compact, deserves special mention—as the very first benchmark and critical to nearly everything else to be achieved in Afghanistan. The commitment was that “a clear and transparent national appointments mechanism will be

established within six months, applied within 12 months and fully implemented within 24 months for all senior level appointments to the central government and the judiciary, as well as for provincial governors, chiefs of police, district administrators and provincial heads of security.” Although its members were appointed with much fanfare, the board has never properly functioned, does not have adequate staff or support and is rarely consulted. We fault the Bush Administration, the other embassies, the UN, the EU and NATO for not standing firm on that key systemic reform for transparency, human rights and institution-building.

While effective military action may deny victory to the insurgency—only effective governance will defeat it.

Looking to the Future

Six and a half years after intervention in Afghanistan, positive developments include a popularly elected government, a stable new currency, two million females back in school and access to basic health care for a large percent of the population, according to UN and government figures. However, Afghanistan’s social indices still rank it 174th out of 178 nations in the UNDP Human Development Index.

Good news is reflected in the extension a week ago of the UN Security Council mandate resolution for one year---although it might well have considered a 5-year extension to make absolutely clear that the commitment to Afghanistan is strategic not tactical.

Finally there is good news in the approval of an experienced Norwegian diplomat UNSRSG Kai Eide whose direct mandate is to “lead the international civilian efforts” to promote coordination of the international effort, to strengthen civilian/military cooperation with ISAF, to support the electoral process which will require either a combined presidential and parliamentary election next year and in 2010 or separate ones in 2009 and 2010; and to support the rule of law.

I also would underscore that the resolution “stresses ... the importance of (the Afghan government’s) meeting the benchmarks and timelines of the Compact” and also gives Eide a responsibility for promoting regional cooperation among Afghanistan’s neighbors.

The test for the NATO summit is whether its members make a long-term commitment to Afghanistan, pledge and rapidly fulfill that pledge of more troops, make real political efforts to remove caveats if it can be done by executive order or to seek their government’s approval, and agree to address the outstanding coordination challenges.

A test for Paris is whether there is a long-term commitment and a frank review of what pledges have not been fulfilled and what benchmarks the government has not met and a timeline for reversing those failures. It also will be vital to see whether the UN itself will be able to say it has met its own staffing gaps and whether the donor community and particularly the EU and its member countries, and above all, the United States, will agree to serious coordination by the UN. While there is much ongoing talk of coordination

there is too little evidence of countries and institutions realigning programs and resources according to collectively agreed priorities.

Steps we suggest to promote coordination:

1. establish a Contact Group made up of the NATO, EU, US, UK, Germany and Canada under UN leadership to steer strategic planning of the international engagement and work out common positions in Kabul, in capitals and in New York.
2. use that Group to reinforce commitment to the broader Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board and to support Eide in his regional efforts.
3. abolish the lead nation/key partner approach and allow the UN to coordinate everyone's efforts in areas such as subnational governance and justice.

When it comes to coordination, the real question as one diplomat mentioned to me in Kabul is that UN coordination is desirable and essential but the elephant in the room has to be willing to be coordinated. He was referring to the United States.

Thank you.