



Remarks With BBC World Service on Afghanistan and Pakistan

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QUESTION: According to the Wall Street Journal, a report published earlier this week, the United States is considering talks with elements of the Taliban as part of a draft recommendation in a White House assessment of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. First question: is the United States considering talks with elements of the Taliban?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No. I'm afraid there are a lot of errors in some reporting on this subject. Everybody's kind of spinning out of control. Here's what's going on: First, there has been a review of how we do better with the job that we're doing in Afghanistan, but frankly I've been around for years and have probably done five of those. We're always trying to make improvements in what we're doing.

Reconciliation is not a topic in that review. I talked to the direct guy who's in charge of drafting it yesterday. He hasn't put pen to paper yet, so there's no draft to quote from. We're not talking about the U.S. talking to the Taliban. The issue is that both Afghanistan and Pakistan, for that matter, have policies on reconciliation. We have been and continue to be willing to support those policies.

QUESTION: As part of that, there was a meeting earlier this week, a so-called mini-jirga in Islamabad. Pakistani and Afghan officials and tribal leaders have agreed to make contact with militants including the Taliban to try and end the violence. Does the United States support those contacts with the Taliban?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: We have supported the jirga process, from the big one that took place a year ago to the smaller ones that are taking place now. It's important to read what they actually said. They said, "We're going to make contact with the opposition with a view to bringing them into the constitutional structure." That's been, frankly, for Pakistan and Afghanistan, very clear -- that they have a path for people who have been fighting them to come in and live under government authority. That's what they're talking about. That's what it seems like the jirgas are talking about here.

QUESTION: And will the U.S. be participating in any way in that process? Will it have any role?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No. We support Pakistani efforts, Afghan efforts, to deal with the terrorists and to bring in those who want to stop fighting, who want to abandon violence. But it's not for us to do. It's not a foreigners thing. This is something for local people to decide who they can reconcile with and how they do that.

QUESTION: But certainly the United States has invested a lot in blood and treasure in Afghanistan. Surely [the United States] would want to have some say in how this political solution is going to come out.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Sure, and we've talked about it quite a bit with the Afghans in particular. It also comes up with our discussions with Pakistan. We have been critical, for example, of some of the negotiations in the old days, two years ago in Pakistan, that didn't result in people actually accepting government authority. We've been supportive when the Afghan government and now the Pakistani government have said these people need to abandon violence, they need to accept government authority. No al-Qaida will come in this way and nobody's going to get criminal immunities this way. But people have been fighting and they want to stop fighting and live under government authority. But governments need to have a path to do that.

QUESTION: On Friday General David Petraeus takes over the command of the U.S. Central Command which oversees operations in Afghanistan. Earlier in October he said talks with some members of the Taliban could reduce violence in Afghanistan. And he's one of a number of people. The most senior British commander in Afghanistan said a similar thing. The British Ambassador to Kabul has said a similar thing. There seems to be a fair bit of momentum towards sitting down with elements of the Taliban. Are you saying these people are wrong?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No, I'm not. I'm saying these people are right, but it's for the Afghans to do it.

Let's get serious about this. First of all, the Afghan government has always been willing to do this. They've always had a reconciliation program. They've always had a reconciliation policy. The problem has not been on the government side. The problem's been on the Taliban side. Everybody's got a rumor about some commander who might be willing to lay down his arms and stop fighting, but none of that has ever materialized because those guys just keep hijacking buses and chopping heads off or gouging farmers' eyes out. We have no serious signs of intention from the Taliban side that they might be willing to reconcile with the government.

QUESTION: If there is going to be some sort of political settlement, it may involve concessions about the number of U.S. troops in the country, or a negotiation over those types of issues. Surely then the U.S. must become involved.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Again, working with the Afghan government and supporting their effort is not a massive role. It means our interests obviously need to be protected, just as we work to protect Afghan government interests. But I don't see this as something where the U.S. tries to sit down at a table and cut a deal over the head of the legitimate Afghan authority. The issue here is accepting legitimate Afghan authority, elected Afghan constitutional government. That's why the Afghan government needs to be in the lead.

QUESTION: As I mentioned, on Friday General David Petraeus takes over U.S. Central Command. Do you think we will see changes in strategy in Afghanistan under him?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think, first of all, he's one of our leading military leaders, but also a strong thinker. I think he will be doing everything possible to dominate the situation, stabilize the situation, support the extension of government in Afghanistan. The reason we do these periodic reviews is to make sure that we are doing everything, try to do better as well as do more. I think that's going to be Petraeus' goal as well, so we all look forward to working with him.

QUESTION: What sort of shift in strategy on the ground in Afghanistan do you think we'll see, though?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: What you've seen this year is a lot more emphasis on provincial and local government, because that's where the government extends itself and meets the people, satisfies the people's needs. I think we need to look at how: we do that job better, we get more provincial development plans, we get more support for governors.

A second area is police. I think we all feel the Afghan military is coming along very well. They're increasingly taking the lead in operations, but police are still either deficient or sometimes a problem. So we need to look at how we do a better job of training and deploying policemen in Afghanistan.

A third element that we're looking at intensely is how we support the civilian extension of government. Right now out at our Provincial Reconstruction Teams, they're heavily military. We're looking at how we might put more civilian capabilities in there: governance, agriculture, things like that.

So there are a number of things we're looking at now. Most of it has to do with getting the government out in the field, helping the government extend itself and deliver what the people want.

QUESTION: This is taking place against a background of increasing violence in Afghanistan after seven years of military operation. Do you think mistakes have been made with the military campaign in the past?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I'm sure the historians will find a long catalogue of things we haven't done as well as we should have. But in the end, you have to deal with the situation. We have a changing enemy, too. Last year they failed. They failed to take towns and territory and so they adjusted their tactics. This year they've just tried to set off bombs and create insecurity. They've been doing that various places around the country. It's not, sort of, a strategic threat of collapsing the government or taking territory, but it makes people feel unsafe. Our job is to build the government capabilities so they can make people feel safe throughout the country.

QUESTION: There are those who argue that perhaps one mistake in Afghanistan has been failing to distinguish enough between al-Qaida and the Taliban. To bring it back to this issue of talking with the Taliban, the successful strategy in Iraq has been to turn the Sunni tribal leaders against al-Qaida. This is something which General David Petraeus has been part of. Could something similar be achieved in Afghanistan by the United States by splitting the Taliban and al-Qaida there?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think you have to be very careful trying to apply one place to another. The tribal situation in Afghanistan is much different than the tribes in Iraq. It's much more local. It's much more a question of communities and local tribal sub-groups. What we do think is important in Afghanistan is to have a government, with our support, working with local communities and tribes and bringing them to your side.

Once you start getting the locals on your side then the enemy is more isolated, then you use that process to extend it into areas where the enemy wants to, maybe on a local level, wants to lay down their arms and make peace. So you need to, sort of, start eating away at the areas at getting people on their side.

QUESTION: Ambassador Boucher, thank you very much for your time today.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Thank you.

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