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**AFGHANISTAN: TRANSITION, RECONCILIATION AND
EXIT STRATEGY**

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It is an honor to be back here at this podium at Johns Hopkins. I am grateful to the School of Advanced International Studies for providing me with a wonderful and rewarding experience here. I am especially grateful to Dr. Eliot Cohen, Professor Walter Andersen and Rahul Madhavan for their support and friendship. I would like to thank every one of you for your interest in Afghanistan and hearing the Afghan perspective.

Ladies and Gentleman,

The mid-term strategy for ending or reducing the U.S. combat role now seems to be based on three pillars. The first is to continue with military pressure to expand recent gains in Kandahar and Helmand, and to further build the

capacity of Afghan security forces and government to be able to take the responsibility of fighting and withstand Taliban offenses after reduction of U.S. combat role. Second, seriously engage the Taliban in a reconciliation process to shore up these gains and improve survival chances of the Afghan government. Third, to sign an enhanced U.S.-Afghan strategic partnership alliance with the Afghan government to serve as an insurance policy to support the two forgoing objective and discourage the neighboring countries from filing in a vacuum left by military disengagement. I will add a fourth pillar of sustainment of the Afghan economy after reduction of foreign aid and contracting funds.

Degrading the Taliban is now the prime objective, not defeating them. Progress has been made to achieve this goal in the south. However, we have a long and uncertain way to go to improve governance and negotiate and reconcile

with the Taliban. We will not have an extraordinarily tough fighting season ahead of us this summer. Taliban capabilities have been degraded in the South. However, we will witness increased suicide attacks and targeting killing of Afghans and Taliban as they lose ground on the front lines. While detailed plans are developed to transition the security responsibility to Afghans and reduce the United States' combat role, the discussion on the end state and final objective of the U.S.-NATO engagement is just shaping up in the form of a U.S.-Afghan strategic partnership declaration.

The transition of security responsibilities is successfully underway. NATO and the Afghan government are working on detailed plans to determine how and where the security responsibilities will fully transition to Afghans in the next 3 years in accordance with the consensus built at the Lisbon Summit. However, such tactical planning will better succeed if it is

coupled with a clear strategic vision of the end state of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and unity of purpose with the Afghan government. The neighboring countries will begin to positively adjust their attitudes if they become certain that U.S. engagement in Afghanistan is truly long-term. Therefore, we need to go beyond tactical preparation and focus on developing a long-term, clear strategic vision for U.S. Afghan relations beyond 2014 in order to overcome uncertainty and insecurity in Afghanistan.

I will discuss three pillars, and if time permits, I will also discuss the urgency of engaging the private sector to sustain economic gains in Afghanistan. We have made significant progress in economic development in Afghanistan, which should be nourished and upheld to make transition sustainable.

I. First Pillar: Keeping the Military Pressure on Building Afghan Security Forces and Improving Governance

The gains in Kandahar and Helmand are very significant though reversible. People feel much safer in Kandahar and Helmand. A drastic increase in night raids and drone attacks have helped destroy the supply routes and the chains of command of the Taliban by taking out a substantial number of mid-level Taliban commanders and facilitators. A large number of “shadow governors” in 33 out of 34 of Afghanistan’s provinces have been killed or arrested by night raids and surgical military operations in the south and north. These operations have effectively increased tension between them and the Taliban leadership living in safe havens outside the country. If sustained, this pressure will help force the Taliban toward

accepting the Afghan government's continued offers to negotiate a political settlement to the conflict.

Furthermore, increased Taliban involvement with criminals and organized crime groups to raise funds and provide protection, coupled with high levels of suicide and roadside attacks in major cities that have caused the killings of many innocent fellow Muslims, have reduced public support for them. People are realizing that while the Taliban may selectively protect both illicit and legal businesses in certain areas, their interaction with civilians is generally predatory in nature through extortion and imposing taxes and protection fees. Indeed, in certain districts, where people have openly welcomed the Taliban as potential saviors from the corrupt and ineffective government officials, the militants are soon perceived as violent gangsters and oppressors.

Building the capacity of the Afghan security forces is progressing well. The security situation improved at the Taliban heartland. However, it has worsened in some areas, especially in the north of Afghanistan. On my last trip, I realized that the main problem in Kabul is not insecurity, it is uncertainty and absence of unity of purpose between the government and its international partners. In the South, the military surge of additional U.S. troops has successfully unfolded. We should keep in mind that the surge that is taking place in Afghanistan is a combined U.S. and Afghan troop surge. The 30,000 NATO troop surge is augmented by a new 81,000 Afghan Security Force.

The Afghan army has reached 158,000 and 24,000 Afghan soldiers are in training every day. The police force has reached 122,000 with an average of 8,500 officers in training every day. There are 70 training sites in 21 provinces and two outside of Afghanistan. The current

level of Afghan security forces is 280,000 fighting alongside about 100,000 U.S. troops and 50,000 NATO soldiers.

Despite the significant progress in building our security forces, Afghans still fear abandonment and are worried that our internal resources and institutions cannot guarantee our safety and security. The mixed results of the Public Protection Force “PPF”, the Afghan Local Police “ALP” (to replace private security companies) and the Arbaki forces in Afghanistan shows that arming tribal militias may not yield the same result as Iraq, due to the fact that the pristine tribal structure of Afghan society has been under attack for the past 30 years by armed factions, warlords, fanatics, narcotic traffickers and the Taliban.

Improving governance has proven to be the most difficult objective. The Afghan Government is still not seriously focused on

developing a national plan and a coherent strategy to combat corruption due to the fact that the government claims to be uncertain of the intentions of its international partners. The Afghan government sees current anti-corruption efforts as a politicized campaign against the government. In the past 10 years, our mutual state-building efforts have been uncoordinated and ad hoc, with a simplistic approach for creating new parallel structures, while ignoring the existing and traditional institutions. Therefore, the international community continues to struggle to add capacity, substance and sustainability to the newly created and improvised government and non-government institutions.

Therefore, there is neither unity of purpose with our international partners nor a comprehensive national plan to cure the symptoms of bad governance, which is caused by corruption, nepotism and lack of rule of law, all of which

drives people into shadow government structures set up by the Taliban. Corruption is regarded as a major impediment to stability by our international partners and the Afghan people. However, the government of Afghanistan sees this issue as a U.S. political pressure tool, a double-standard policy and even a conspiracy. Some Afghan officials perceive the current degree of corruption in a post-conflict country to be comparable to neighboring countries and among some other U.S. allies.

The domestic politics of Afghanistan have become more fractured along ethnic lines and further polarized. While military muscles have been built and the performance of our Afghan national army has significantly improved, governance and the delivery of services by the Afghan state have remained on life support.

II. Second Pillar: Reconciliation

The growing recognition by Afghan and NATO leaders of the need for negotiating with the Taliban and political settlement to complete the counter-insurgency strategy is supported by the Afghan people.

However, the focus of the Afghan government is more on a ceasefire or political deal than a reconciliation process. A national consensus has yet to be achieved to reduce the anxiety among Afghans in major cities, as well as women and ethnic minorities, about the price they will be asked to pay to reconcile with the Taliban in light of their dark, oppressive past. Their position is that peace and reconciliation will not be sustainable if it comes either at the cost of compromising hard-earned, basic citizen rights or leads to antagonizing large segments of the Afghan nation. Then peace and stability will remain elusive.

Therefore to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity, it is time for the United States and the international community to publically declare its position, beyond the guarded and vague approach of qualified support for the Afghan-led peace efforts, and set forth, in consultation with Afghans, the parameters of the compromise with the Taliban. War in Afghanistan has regional and international dimensions and peace cannot be achieved and sustained without regional cooperation and resolute U.S. leadership.

If you do not insist on these parameters, Afghans will think that our partners are shedding their responsibilities and treating reconciliation as a platform for military disengagement and a premature end to their active combat role. Afghans are pragmatic and know that we live in a volatile region and predatory neighborhood.

Ladies and Gentleman,

The objective pursued by Afghan leadership is more a ceasefire; some even call it a submission rather than a full reconciliation plan that would include negotiation, amnesty and reintegration. The ad hoc contacts with individual Taliban commanders has been going on for the past nine years, and some members of the Taliban have been occupying public offices in the government and parliament.

For instance, the “Program for Strengthening Peace and Reconciliation” was founded in 2005 and is led by a close ally of President Karzai, President Sibghatullah Mujadedi. This initiative claims persuading 9,000 Taliban fighters to allegedly renounce violence, despite the fact that it is severely underfunded. It is difficult to verify how effective this program has been to continuously keep the Taliban on the

government's side. Some of the Taliban are using this program to gain freedom of movement in Afghanistan while continuing with their terrorist activities, as evidenced by the recent killing of UN workers in Mazar-i Sarif carried out by those who claimed that they joined the government and renounced violence.

Additionally, the “Mecca talks” started in September 2008 in Saudi Arabia and were followed by a second round in January and a third in the summer of 2010. Former Taliban officials Abdul Salam Zaif and Arsala Rahmani spearheaded these talks. Lower level contacts have taken place in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and the Maldives. Arranged by Pakistan, some Taliban leaders have occasionally talked with the Afghan and international communities through Skype. Furthermore, Hekmatyar has submitted a 15 point peace plan that does not demand the immediate step-down of the Afghan government and provides a “safe passage” for foreign forces,

a term coined during the negotiation with the Red Army in the 1980s.

Finally, a “Consultative Peace Jirga”, or council, was held in Kabul from June 2 through June 4, 2010 with 1,600 delegates including 350 women. Its effectiveness was questioned by Afghans and the international community since it was an extra-judicial institution. The Peace Jirga came up with a number of recommendations, including support for President Karzai’s call for the removal of the names of certain members of the Taliban from the UN list.

The “Peace Council” was formed on September 5, 2010 with 70 members, including 25 Taliban and Hezb-e Islami members, 53 members belonging to various armed factions involved in the civil war of 1980s and 1990s, and a group of 10 relatively unknown women. The former Minister of the Taliban, Arsala Rahmani, is the

spokesman and President Rabani is the President of the Council.

However, there has not been much substance in the Peace Council or referenced meetings. The Council is perceived to be unaware of the real contacts and meetings that are carried out by President Karzai's older brother and the Deputy Chief of Intelligence. So far, the negotiations are fear and survival driven rather than being based on a clear vision and calculated plan. There is no formal amnesty in place to deliver some transitional justice or at least forgive the past or help forget the past. Justice has not been delivered; healing has not started.

Furthermore, the Taliban still do not feel compelled to seriously engage in the political process. If they are not losing, why should they talk to us? We should not forget that the definition of victory for the Taliban is very simple: victory is their ability to destroy and

disrupt. As long as they are able to do so and enjoy access to sanctuaries and funds, they will not feel compelled to reconcile and converse. Public statements over-emphasizing the withdrawal date should be avoided in order to not feed the Taliban propaganda, which is continuously questioning the U.S. and NATO's staying power.

Therefore, we need unity of purpose and a plan for the reconciliation process adopted collectively by Afghanistan, the U.S. and NATO for selectively eliminating, embracing, flipping or splitting various Taliban groups. To achieve a unified strategy, discussion should start among Afghan and U.S. officials about who should sit around the negotiation table and what role, if any, the UN or a UN official can play. Should the talk be close, intimate and intra-Afghan with UN observers or independent mediators, which is preferred by the Afghan government and the Taliban, or should the U.S.

and Pakistan be part of a 2+2 arrangement. The degree of engaging and leveraging certain regional powers should be discussed, especially Saudi Arabia, Iran, and India. Would the venue be in a safe haven in Afghanistan or Pakistan or a neutral venue? Pakistan is not the right venue, even according to the Taliban officials that are in contact with the government. Deleting Taliban leaders from the UN list should not be the starting point but an important bargaining tool. Such permanent delisting should be the last step and conditional upon the Taliban splitting from Al Qaeda, which will be the Taliban's last step, too. Such delisting should only be done when this splitting occurs.

III. Third Pillar: A Strategic Partnership with U.S. and Regional Cooperation

For the first time, discussion about the nature and depth of a U.S.-Afghan strategic partnership

has started both here and in Kabul, and the idea is to complete such a discussion before the 10th anniversary of the Bonn Agreement and a possible Bonn II Agreement. The first sketches of a draft declaration have been exchanged and U.S. and afghan officials have met in Kabul. A strategic partnership with the U.S. will be much more robust after the Afghan leadership develops a clear vision for the future of the country.

On one hand, the unity of purpose must be restored for the partnership to be operational. On one hand, on the military front, the Afghan war theater has acquired much better unified military command, improved coordination, and proper prioritization for protecting civilians. On the other hand, the Afghan government is drifting apart from its international partners, and our international partners are struggling to find better ways to deal with the Afghan leadership and work with or around the Afghan

government. Afghanistan is going through a critical period of its recent history. However, the Afghan government, the newly created parliament and even the opposition leaders are failing to provide a clear vision about the transition and the future of Afghanistan beyond 2014. Last week, I met with a number of parliamentarians on my last trip. Unfortunately, the quality of the delegates has deteriorated. The concern is that the current parliament will further paralyze the executive branch and provide a platform for populists and fanatics in Afghanistan.

While Afghans are killed in the front lines, market squares and mosques by the brutal enemy is frequently referred to as a brother. The Taliban are manipulating our ambiguity. The Afghan people are resilient, moderate and pragmatic by nature. They expect a clear vision from the country's leadership to guide the country in this crucial transitional period. Most

Afghans want to fight to win in Afghanistan. They dislike the attitude of some of our European partners that are just fighting not to lose. Afghans want to know how Afghanistan will fit in the new emerging Asia and what the nature and depth of our partnership will be with U.S. and NATO allies in upcoming decades.

IV. Fourth Pillar: Sustaining Economic Development

Afghanistan has experienced remarkable economic growth despite typical war economy impediments. The challenge for the transition is to switch from a dependency on government aid and government contracting to a sustainable, private-sector-led economy. Fortunately, alongside the government contracting and war economy, new economic institutions are developing with a permanent impact upon the

Afghan economy and facilitating a better business environment.

The government's inexperience in restructuring the economy in early 2003-2006 helped certain political elites monopolize major projects.

However, the conditions are now improving.

These powerful interest groups formed around senior officials, tribes and other trust networks are now feeling the heat. Better safeguards are now in place to prevent the interest groups from gaining unfair advantages in foreign and government tenders and lucrative contracts.

However, there is still room to further limit the tribal and political elite's capture of foreign contracts and government resources on the national and provincial levels. They undermine the commitment to fight corruption and the sustainability of the political and economic structures on which we all depend. This is a particularly difficult issue in Afghanistan, where political connections are becoming vital in

doing business. The international community is perceived as enforcing the anti-corruption drive selectively, as they have limited knowledge about the dark history of some local players and their connections, or they are in a hurry to deliver results.

The potential for economic growth in Afghanistan is much bigger due to our strategic location, untapped mineral resources and the resiliency and entrepreneurship of the people. An immediate plan of action is needed to address high and unpredictable taxation, corruption, insecurity and lack of a reliable access to land, energy and capital. Although ransom and kidnapping have been reduced due to better performance of the Ministry of Interior, the private sector still pays prohibitive expenses in seeking private protection and security. A new alternative must be developed by the private sector, in consultation with the Afghan government, to replace or supplement the

crucial role of the private security companies and prevent “nuisance taxes.”

Additionally, a new strategy is being formulated to infuse more U.S. private-sector resources and talent to support the growth of the Afghan economy after government contracts are reduced. By creating linkages to multinational firms, this plan is empowering Afghans to increase their access to larger markets, physical and human capital, mentorship and business advisory services.

Ladies and Gentleman,

To conclude, a new three-pillar strategy is gradually shaping up. Transition is successfully underway. Security is improving in Afghanistan and prosperity is increasing. However, the full success of the exit strategy will depend on a long-term, integrated vision for U.S.-Afghan strategic and enhanced regional cooperation to

provide assurance and eliminate uncertainty and the mutual trust deficit. The unity of purpose to fight a common enemy and mutual trust and confidence between the Afghan government and its international partners, as well as regional powers, must be restored for the transition to fully succeed.

Thank you.