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April 2, 2009

“U.S. Strategy for Afghanistan: Achieving Peace and Stability in the Graveyard of Empires”
Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman
House Subcommittee on the Middle East & South Asia

The subcommittee will come to order. Last week, President Obama announced his new strategy for fighting extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. I wholeheartedly support the President’s new approach. The previous Administration--by its own admission--never recognized that the true central front in the struggle to secure our nation was Afghanistan, where the 9/11 attacks were orchestrated, not Iraq. It’s been clear for years that the last administration took its eye off the ball and allowed al Qaeda and the Taliban to regroup and rearm in Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. For years, the fight against extremists has been under-manned, under-funded and lacked a coherent strategy. President Obama’s new strategy recognizes those facts and moves aggressively to address them. I am gratified that it contains many elements that I and others in the Congress have been urging for several years.

First, the President laid out a clear objective which is, “to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent their return to either country in the future.” I know that there has been concern expressed that focusing our attention on al Qaeda -- the reason U.S. forces are in Afghanistan in the first place -- somehow means that we are abandoning our efforts to establish functioning democratic government in that country. I think a close examination of the strategy reveals that the President intends to both stabilize the security situation in Afghanistan and continue our work to improve governance there. Successfully focusing on al Qaeda will give us and our allies the “exit strategy” the President wants in order to reduce our military footprint there and to sustain allied involvement. But that does not mean that work on Afghanistan’s democratic institutions won’t continue.

No discussion of an exit from Afghanistan can even be contemplated until the security situation is stable and al Qaeda and the Taliban can no longer use Afghanistan as a base for terrorist operations. In the near term that means more troops. I have been calling for additional U.S. forces for Afghanistan since 2002, so the President’s announcement of 17,000 additional combat troops and 4,000 additional trainers is a welcome development. It is clear that neither we nor the Afghans have sufficient forces to take and hold territory once it has been cleared of extremists. More U.S. forces will allow us to do that. In the long term, more and better trained Afghan forces will be able to do it for themselves, allowing U.S. and other NATO forces to recede into the background and ultimately withdraw.

While we’re on the subject of NATO, I know that the President will use the summit tomorrow to remind our allies that Afghanistan is their fight too. While some NATO allies may not be willing to provide more combat soldiers, there are other capabilities they could provide -- such as strategic airlift and military trainers and mentors -- that would support the overall security mission there. There are also civilian aspects of

reconstruction and capacity-building at both national and local government levels with which our allies could assist.

But more resources from more countries also has to mean more and better coordination by us. A signature result of the Bush Administration strategy of subcontracting Afghanistan to our allies is that there has been little central coordination of either the political or military effort, and many nations sent forces with vastly different rules of engagement. Each nation charged with securing a portion of the country or rebuilding some devastated Afghan institution went off in their own direction, with their own objectives, and reported to their national capital. It should surprise no one that as a result, little was accomplished. Afghanistan is a case study of what happens when the United States abandons its leadership role in an international security crisis. What's most remarkable is that it hasn't turned out even worse.

More resources also means more money, from us and the international community. But as the President's plan makes clear, more of that money needs to reach the Afghan people and much, much less of it should be spent inside the beltway on consultants or on overhead. Our assistance should be used to purchase goods and services from Afghan providers and to put Afghans to work.

We can't talk about strategy in Afghanistan without talking about narcotics and the corrosive effect drug trafficking has on security and governance. Afghanistan is the source of 93% of the world's opium and even though the most recent report by the UN Office on Crime and Drugs shows an increase in the number of poppy free provinces and an overall decrease in the amount of opium produced, there is still far too much drug money sloshing around in Afghanistan tempting everyone from local policemen to provincial governors. Afghans will never believe they have a real alternative to the Taliban as long as they see local and even national officials on the take. Opium eradication, crop substitution, effective transportation for those crops and improved local security all have to be combined in order to make legal crops safe and profitable for Afghan farmers. In a nation where 70% of the population lives in the countryside, safe and profitable alternatives to poppy production are not optional. The President's strategy recognizes the need for an effective counter narcotics strategy by combining the elements I just described with new authorities for US and NATO forces to directly support Afghan counter-narcotics units during the interdiction of narcotics traffickers.

There's one more element necessary for a successful strategy and that is a coherent regional approach. In particular, one that deals effectively with Iran and Pakistan. As usual, Iran has tried to have it both ways in Afghanistan. On the one hand they have legitimate concerns regarding the impact of narcotics trafficking and the attendant instability that results yet there is also significant evidence that Iran has shipped weapons to the Taliban in an effort to gain leverage over us. The United States has talked to Iran before in the context of Afghanistan and it is a positive sign that Iran attended the international meeting on Afghanistan earlier this week. But while we seek their cooperation in Afghanistan, we should also insist they stop arms shipments to the Taliban in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1390.

The question of Pakistan's role is even more complex and frankly merits its own separate hearing. Suffice to say that the entire endeavor in Afghanistan is unlikely to succeed if terrorist safe havens in Pakistan are not eliminated. The government of Pakistan, and more importantly, the people of Pakistan must come to realize that the terrorists they have nurtured for decades have now turned on them as this week's attack in Lahore clearly demonstrates. The fight against extremists is not solely an American fight, nor is it solely an Afghan fight. The fight belongs to Pakistan too. It is a fight for their very existence as a nation and they ignore the problem at their own peril. I cannot say it more clearly: there is a real and present danger to Pakistan's survival, but it comes from inside, not outside the country.

President Obama's strategy for Afghanistan is a welcome, indeed desperately needed change from 8 years of reliance on ad hoc, under-funded, under-manned, uncoordinated, faith-based strategies. It's time to finally devote our attention, energy and resources to defeating the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11. My strong view is that the President has given us a realistic strategy to accomplish that goal.

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