



**2014 AND BEYOND:
U.S. POLICY TOWARDS
AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN,
PART I**

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Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia
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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for your invitation to testify on U.S. policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. I will focus my remarks today on the Administration's current strategy and its prospects for success, given the evolving situation in the region.

Preparing for the 2014 Security Transition in Afghanistan

Led by the United States, the international community committed itself at the Lisbon Summit to complete a security transition in Afghanistan by 2014. By this date, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) will assume full responsibility for its internal and external security, thus permitting the international coalition to transition from active combat operations and to progressively begin the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. To meet this goal, the GIROA, in collaboration with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), is currently in the process of identifying the areas that will be handed over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in three tranches.

The first tranche announced by President Hamid Karzai in March this year involved the transfer of security responsibility in all districts of Bamyan, Panjshir, and Kabul provinces (with the exception of the Surobi district in Kabul), as well as the municipalities of Mazar-e-Sharif (Balkh province), Herat (Herat province), Lashkar Gah (Helmand province), and Mehtar Lam (Laghman province). This handover, which began in July, involved areas that were "either relatively free of insurgent activity or have a heavy presence of U.S. and NATO troops that can intervene anytime Afghan security forces become overwhelmed," as Alex Rodriguez summarized it in the *Los Angeles Times* (Alex Rodriguez, "Karzai lists areas due for security transfer," *Los Angeles Times*, [March 23, 2011](#)).

The GIROA and the ISAF leadership are now completing discussions on which areas would revert to Afghan responsibility in the second tranche. Based on remarks by both American military officers and Afghan officials, it is likely that Afghan forces will assume responsibility for some dangerous and contested areas right away—when coalition forces are still present in the country in substantial strength—while preparing themselves for assuming nationwide control in the third tranche, which will likely begin in 2013 and continue well into the following year. If this timetable holds, the security transition envisaged by the international community at Lisbon will be completed by 2014, when coalition forces will cease to have primary responsibility for assuring Afghan security.

But, Can the Security Transition Deliver?

It is unclear, however, whether this transition will be successful on the above timelines for two reasons. First, although the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) has made remarkable progress in building up the ANSF in recent years, it is unlikely that these indigenous forces—military, police, and militia—will be capable of independently securing the country against the wide range of terrorist and insurgent groups that will still be present in the region in 2014. Second, President Barack Obama's decision to withdraw the surge forces from Afghanistan by September 2012—which in effect means that American troops will begin rotating out of the country starting in spring next year *before* the second fighting

season is even fully underway—will prevent U.S. military commanders from being able to complete what they have so effectively begun: decimating the mid-level command structure of the Taliban, which serves as the vital link between the *rabbari shura* (the leadership council) based in Quetta, Pakistan, and their foot soldiers in the field. President Obama's decision to withdraw the entire surge force by 2012—rather than keep it deployed in Afghanistan until the security transition is concluded—thus denies the ISAF the opportunity to expand the successful clearing operations already begun in the south to eastern Afghanistan. The still-maturing ANSF will thus be left with a much more difficult task than would be the case if U.S. forces were present in strength and were able to clear the east as well before the security transition was complete.

The vicious interaction of the ANSF's immaturity and the premature diminution of U.S. combat power in Afghanistan makes it very likely that, although the security transition will proceed on schedule, the Afghan state will still be incapable of autonomously neutralizing the threats posed by the Taliban insurgency and the terrorist groups—such as al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and the Haqqani network—which support its operations in different ways. If the GIROA fails to neutralize these threats, as is to be expected at least in the initial phase following the security transition, the United States and its coalition partners will have no choice but to support Afghan counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban and its affiliates, because a defeat here implies the potential collapse of the Afghan state and a return to warlordism and civil strife, all of which produce the enabling conditions for an upsurge in global terrorism. Consequently, even if the security transition is successful as a process in and of itself, it will not eliminate the threats to the American homeland and the homelands of our allies if the ANSF remains incapable of independently neutralizing the myriad security threats in Afghanistan.

Enter Political Reconciliation as *Deus Ex Machina*

The Administration has attempted to resolve this conundrum by promoting reconciliation with the Taliban. This approach is premised on the calculation that a political solution to the conflict would, by definition, minimize the burdens facing the ANSF in regards to security en route to and after the transition; it would also enable the Administration to proceed with progressively larger troop withdrawals from Afghanistan as peace gradually returns. Consistent with this logic, the Administration has initiated a series of overtures towards both the Quetta *shura* and the Haqqani network in the hope of exploring the prospects for reconciliation. The Karzai government, using its own intermediaries and the High Peace Council headed by the late Burhanuddin Rabbani, has also embarked on parallel outreach efforts towards the Quetta *shura*, the Haqqani network, and the Hizb-i-Islami (Gulbuddin) headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

While reaching out to these adversaries is sensible in principle, this effort has not yet yielded much fruit in practice—and is unlikely to do so in any meaningful way at least in time to assure a peaceful security transition in 2014. The reasons for this failure are many and intractable.

To begin, it is still not clear whether the Quetta *shura* has any genuine interest in reconciliation with the GIROA on the terms laid out by the United States: the insurgents

must renounce violence; irrevocably cut their ties with al-Qaeda; and abide by the Afghan constitution, including its protections for women and minorities. The *shura*'s acceptance of these terms would be tantamount to accepting defeat after a decade of war. While it is possible that the Afghan Taliban *might* be willing to cut ties with al-Qaeda as part of a larger settlement with the GIROA—though the evidence today at the operational level only corroborates how deeply intertwined these two groups have become—it is patently unclear why the insurgent leadership would want to accept such peace terms right now, no matter how uncomfortable they may be with their Pakistani protectors and how desirous they are of returning to their own country.

For starters, they believe that so far they have only been hurt, but not decisively defeated, by the ISAF's military operations. And, more to the point, they are convinced that NATO forces are irrevocably headed out the door by 2014 and will leave behind a fragile Afghan state that constitutes easy pickings. For an insurgency, whose members have survived over thirty years of bitter and unrelenting war, to surrender on the eve of the departure of its most capable opponents defies reason—and the recent assassination of the GIROA's principal envoy, Burhanuddin Rabbani, by the Taliban signals that the *shura* may not perceive an urgency for peace that matches the Administration's need for a successful reconciliation as part of the security transition. Rabbani's killing has now dulled even Karzai's enthusiasm for negotiations with the Taliban, and it has deepened skepticism throughout Afghanistan about the prospects for a peaceful termination to the conflict.

Furthermore, other factors complicate the *shura*'s incentives for a settlement. Even if it is assumed that the Taliban can stomach an Afghan constitution that respects gender rights and the rights of minorities—a difficult proposition given their antediluvian ideology and repressive social practices—it would be much harder for the movement to accept what President Karzai and the United States are now mutually negotiating even as they encourage the Taliban to reconcile: a strategic partnership declaration (SPD) that promises a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

Almost every analysis of the motivations underlying the Taliban insurgency concludes that whatever the myriad grievances of the rebels may be in regard to government corruption, tribal rivalries, and liberal social practices, they are united in their opposition to the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan. If that is the case, the prospect that the *shura* would reconcile with the GIROA is dim. At a time when the insurgent leadership does not believe that it has been conclusively defeated, when it is convinced that its adversaries are headed for the exit, and when its principal antagonist offers a peace but at the price of accepting continued foreign military presence in their country, the attractiveness of reconciliation quickly becomes evanescent.

This last issue of foreign military forces creates a chicken-and-egg conundrum: of course, an SPD that did not provide for an American presence would make reconciliation with the GIROA a tad more attractive for the Taliban, but given that even reconciliation does not eliminate the prospect of future power struggles in Afghanistan, there are fewer incentives for Karzai to pursue reconciliation if he could not assure himself of an enduring American presence that protects him and his regime's interests. In other words, the American protection that makes reconciliation viable for the GIROA makes it unacceptable for the Taliban.

Given these realities, it is not surprising that the Administration's initiatives regarding reconciliation have not borne much fruit thus far. The Haqqani network has declared that it will not be party to separate peace talks with the Administration, deferring instead to the Quetta *shura* as the lead interlocutor for any negotiations. The *shura*, by all accounts, still appears to evince some sort of interest in discussions—but not with Kabul, only with Washington. This insistence, of course, undermines the Administration's position that reconciliation ultimately must be an Afghan-led process, but even this problem is manageable in comparison to some of the others discussed above. In any event, despite several Administration conversations with the *shura*'s representative thus far—identified in press reports as Tayeb Agha, a secretary to Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban *emir*—it is still not clear how committed the insurgent leadership is to a negotiated end to the war or whether the *shura* is simply playing the United States as it bides its time waiting for the transition.

At the End of the Day, the Problem is Pakistan

Although the prospects for political reconciliation are undermined by many challenges, at the end of the day there is none as vexing as the problematic role of Pakistan. This is a quandary with multiple dimensions. The most obvious reason why the Quetta *shura* has reduced incentives to reconcile with the GIROA is because they—and their fighters embedded currently in communities along the frontier—enjoy substantial immunity to coalition military action because of the sanctuary provided by Pakistan. So long as the coalition either cannot or will not breach this sanctuary out of respect for Pakistan's sovereignty, two consequences obtain: first, the *shura* will not feel compelled to reconcile with the GIROA because their security and their warfighting capabilities cannot be held at risk by military actions; and, second, Pakistan becomes the kingmaker, determining the success or failure of Afghan reconciliation because of the pressure it can apply on the *shura* and its affiliates with regard to decisions relating to war and peace.

Recognizing this fact, the Obama Administration has sought to persuade Pakistan—through a combination of public and private entreaties as well as pressure—to encourage the Quetta *shura* and its constituents to enter into a dialogue with the United States and with Afghanistan. Despite repeated efforts, however, the Administration's initiatives have not produced much thus far for the simple reason that American and Pakistani objectives on this issue are fundamentally at odds. The United States seeks to leave behind after 2014 an Afghanistan that is united, capable, and independent. Pakistan, in contrast, seeks an Afghanistan that, although nominally unified, is anything but capable and independent. Specifically, it desires an Afghanistan that would be at least deferential to, if not dependent on, Islamabad where Kabul's critical strategic and foreign policy choices are concerned.

Stated precisely, Pakistan seeks an Afghanistan that is strong enough to prevent its internal problems from spilling over into Pakistan, but not so strong as to be able to pursue independent policies that might compete with Pakistan's own interests. Key military leaders who drive Pakistan's national policies on this matter seem to hold the belief that a return to the pre-2001 past is still possible—a situation where Afghanistan remains somewhat chaotic, but “manageable,” non-threatening, and decidedly subordinate to Pakistan in the

international arena. The persistence of this conviction enables Rawalpindi—the headquarters of the Pakistani military where all these decisions are made—to avoid unpleasant choices about cutting ties with the insurgency and grants it the latitude to attempt pushing the United States without forcing a complete break in bilateral relations.

A stable but subordinate Afghanistan thus remains Pakistan’s ultimate strategic goal: such subservience on the part of Kabul would permit Islamabad to gain an advantage in regard to managing both its independent rivalry with Afghanistan and the challenges posed by the evolving Afghan-Indian geopolitical partnership. Unfortunately for Pakistan, if the international community succeeds in its current endeavors in Afghanistan, it would end up leaving behind a state that would be anything but deferential to Pakistan—thus justifying in Rawalpindi the problematic strategy that is intended to prevent exactly this outcome.

Pakistan’s continuing support for the Quetta *shura* and the Haqqani network remain the key instrument by which it seeks to secure its strategic aims vis-à-vis Afghanistan. By aiding these groups, protecting them, and supporting their operations, Pakistan seeks to use them as bargaining chips in its negotiations with Kabul. These negotiations are aimed ultimately at securing Afghanistan’s acceptance of Pakistan’s western boundaries, Islamabad’s authority over the Pakistani Pashtuns, and constraints on Afghan-Indian ties (and Afghanistan’s strategic policies more generally) as determined by Pakistan. Because the Pakistani military believes that the Quetta *shura* and the Haqqani network would be relatively sympathetic to its interests on these issues—in comparison to other elements in Afghan society—it has continued, and will continue, to protect these assets despite the larger efforts of the United States to defeat them.

It is not obvious, however, that the Quetta *shura* will be as supportive of Islamabad’s interests as the Pakistani “deep state” often believes; the Haqqanis may be more pliable on this count, but they are also less influential in Afghan society and hence matter less in comparison. Given the choices available to Pakistan, however, the *shura* and the Haqqanis are judged to be better investments for advancing Pakistani interests in Afghanistan than those currently dominating politics in Kabul and, consequently, they will enjoy Pakistan’s continued support against all U.S. efforts at interdicting them. In the game of chicken between Rawalpindi and Washington since the killing of Osama bin Laden, the United States has already blinked on this score: after initially insisting both publicly and privately that Pakistan target the insurgents through military action (including in North Waziristan), the Administration has now settled on simply urging Pakistan to bring the insurgent groups to the negotiating table.

For a country that denied having any relationship with the insurgents for almost a decade, Pakistan presently appears willing to consider the U.S. request—but on its own terms. For example, senior Pakistani military leaders have repeatedly urged U.S. officials to cease combat operations against the insurgents on the grounds that fighting while talking was incompatible; similarly, they have resisted American pleas for expanded Pakistani military action against the insurgents on the grounds that it would undermine their ability to intercede with the militants in future negotiations. The Pakistani military has also demanded from its American interlocutors greater clarity about the desired end-state in Afghanistan, thus conditioning its willingness to bring the insurgents to the table on some assurance that

they will become part of a future governing regime in Afghanistan that protects Pakistan's interests.

Because such assurances cannot be offered by the United States—and will not be offered presently by President Karzai even if he wanted to—without undermining the current constitutional order in Afghanistan, Pakistan has declined thus far to issue any public appeals to the insurgents urging them to participate in the peace process. According to senior Afghan officials who have discussed this matter privately, Pakistan has also declined to offer safe passage to any *shura* leaders resident in its territories who may be inclined to discuss reconciliation directly with Kabul. More tellingly, it has gone out of its way to target Afghan Taliban leaders who have displayed any inclination for independent negotiations with the GIROA. And, finally, Pakistan has betrayed no interest in providing Afghan officials with access to those Taliban leaders detained by Islamabad, despite repeated Afghan requests on this score.

The current strategy of the Pakistani military leadership thus suggests that they are prepared to assist with Afghan reconciliation only if it advances their conception of what constitutes a desirable outcome—a malleable regime in Kabul post-2014—and only if they are permitted to play the paramount role in midwifing this result. Unfortunately, this approach—however understandable from a Pakistani perspective—only ends up further alienating the GIROA and the Afghans more broadly. It makes them even more determined to resist Pakistani domination and further deepens their reliance on India—actions that, in turn, only reinforce the destructive Pakistani behaviors that generated the cycle of distrust in the first place.

Unfortunately for the United States, there are no easy ways out of this predicament. If the Administration surrenders to the Pakistani demand for a controlling interest in the reconciliation process and its outcome, it will lose the GIROA as a partner in Afghanistan and alienate key Afghan constituencies including the Pashtuns; it will also stoke an ethnic backlash within the country and pave the way for deepened regional competition involving India, Iran, and the Central Asian republics, which are certain to coalesce to prevent any Pakistani domination of Afghanistan. If the Administration supports the GIROA—as it should—it runs the risk that Pakistan will continue to play its subversive games: supporting the Taliban insurgency while offering only as much counterinsurgency and counterterrorism cooperation as is necessary to keep American assistance flowing, and maintaining the appearance of assisting reconciliation while withholding true cooperation until such time as it is assured that its proxies will enjoy the guaranteed access to power that provides Pakistan with dominant influence in Afghanistan.

The Administration's recent decision to accord Pakistan a principal role in the reconciliation negotiations, therefore, represents a dangerous gamble. Although born out of frustration rather than predilection, it could end up not in a breakthrough but in a frustrating stalemate. Clearly, Pakistan cannot be excluded from the reconciliation process, nor should it be. But it is hard to imagine how Rawalpindi can proffer a solution here that advances its own interests while being simultaneously acceptable to Kabul. A satisfactory outcome would require either Pakistan to give up on its goal of dominating Afghanistan, or Kabul to give up on its objective of avoiding subordination to Islamabad: either of these two outcomes could make political reconciliation with the Taliban feasible, but neither eventuality seems in sight. As a result, the Administration's new reliance on Pakistan to catalyze the reconciliation process,

far from providing a fillip to “fight, talk, and build,” could actually provoke endless prevarication that is intended mainly to wait out the American drawdown in Afghanistan.

The only two solutions that the United States had in principle to defeat this Pakistani strategy now lie beyond reach. A comprehensive military success against the Taliban could have rendered the need for reconciliation less pressing, but neither the Bush nor the Obama Administration allocated the resources necessary to procure this outcome when circumstances were favorable; neither Administration was successful in confronting Pakistan over the sanctuaries either, thus leaving the U.S. military with the horrendous task of attempting to defeat a well-protected insurgency without sufficient manpower or the ability to target its foreign sources of support.

An ironclad American commitment to invest and endure in Afghanistan would have enabled the coalition to defeat the Pakistani strategy as well because, whatever Islamabad’s local advantages may be, Pakistan cannot end up victorious in any sustained strategic competition with the United States. American misgivings about the costs of the Afghan war, the merit of the stakes involved, and the integrity of its Afghan partners, all combined, however, to provoke a strategic mistake by the Obama Administration: announcing a public deadline for withdrawal from Afghanistan. The net effect of this unfortunate announcement has not been increased pressure for arriving at a political solution; rather, it has only motivated the insurgents to run down the clock while also inducing Pakistan to protect its proxies all the more zealously because of the expectation that they will become indispensable for advancing Rawalpindi’s interests in the aftermath of the coming security transition. The administration’s new reliance on Pakistan to shepherd reconciliation will only provide Rawalpindi with more opportunities to achieve these aims—and, in the process, animate greater Afghan and regional opposition to Pakistan. These dynamics cumulatively will also contribute to further undermining American aims in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Obama Administration’s strategy of “fight, talk, and build” is, therefore, subverted not by any intrinsic illogic but by the welter of contradictions embedded in the corrosive external environment within which it must be implemented. Even the administration’s otherwise sensible emphasis on strengthening the Afghan and Pakistani states and integrating them into a larger regional trading order is still subject to the risks of being undermined by the persistent Pakistani military discomfort with economic integration within the greater Southern Asian region—although to its credit, President Asif Zardari’s civilian government in Pakistan has persisted in pushing the boundaries of the possible in this regard.

The larger problem, however, remains the dangerous game of “managed jihadism” still played by Pakistan. Rawalpindi continues to solicit and accept American assistance in fighting some terrorist groups, such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Tehrik-e-Taliban Mohmand (TTM), the Tehrik-e-Nefaz-e-Shari’at-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), and the Lashkar-e-Islami (LI), which directly target Pakistan, even as it supports other militant groups, such as the Quetta *shura*, the Haqqani network, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, which attack the interests of its coalition partners.

To date, the United States and the international community have failed to change this troublesome Pakistani behavior. Persuasion has had little impact because the Pakistani military, which dominates national security policymaking within the country, has a deeply

entrenched and pernicious worldview that is not susceptible to change without a dramatic transformation of the Pakistani state itself—something that is nowhere in sight right now. Even bribery by the United States in the form of generous military and civilian assistance has made no difference, because the Pakistani military has calculated that it can pursue its current subversive policies without fear of retaliation because Pakistan is too important to be punished or to be allowed to fail. And meaningful coercion by Washington has never been tried because of our dependence on Pakistan for continued prosecution of the counterterrorism campaign inside their country and for the ground and air lines of communications supporting U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, a reliance that has reinforced Rawalpindi's belief that it is immune to the most consequential American threats.

Where Do We Go From Here?

When all is said and done, there is no denying the fact that the situation in the region is unfavorable for the success of the Administration's policy, at least insofar as that policy is centered on the hope of reconciliation as a means of bridging the limitations in indigenous Afghan capabilities in the context of the coming security transition. If the United States is to snatch some success in these circumstances, it will require not jettisoning reconciliation so much as recommitting to the "hardening" of the Afghan state. Confronting the problems of governmental corruption will be important in this connection, but they cannot constitute the central part of the enterprise; the international community has made its own modest contributions to the prevalence of corruption in Afghanistan and this cancer will not be eradicated anytime soon even if President Karzai were to act with as much virtue as the United States demands. Rather, the focus of buttressing Afghanistan must rest on aiding the evolution of political devolution, assuring a peaceful transition of presidential power in accordance with current constitutional constraints, and comprehensively strengthening administrative organs of state, especially the ANSF. That Pakistan will continue to play an unhelpful role as this effort persists must simply be accepted as a fact of life. Yet, meaningful success can nonetheless be achieved despite Rawalpindi's interference—if success in this context is defined as leaving behind after 2014 an Afghan state that is durable enough to ensure that the Taliban can never regain the meaningful control in Afghanistan that would permit al-Qaeda and other global terrorist groups to return and operate with impunity.

Ensuring such a modicum of success will require many policy adjustments, but the most important—which are conveyed telegraphically here—include:

- Ensuring that the strategic partnership agreement that the Administration is currently negotiating with Afghanistan provides the United States with sufficient basing rights to deploy the appropriate mix of air and ground forces necessary to conduct counterterrorism operations and support the ANSF as appropriate over the long term.
- Funding, in cooperation with the international community, the entire complement of Afghan national security forces committed to in current NATO-ISAF-GIROA plans.
- Delaying the withdrawal of surge troops already provided to U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan beyond 2012 so as to enable them to consolidate coalition control in the south and in the east before the security transition.

- Assisting Afghanistan in regard to regional economic integration, development of its administrative capacity, and management of its economy so as to strengthen its capacity in the coming era of diminished external assistance.
- Accelerating the expansion of the Northern Distribution Network as a hedge against continued reliance on Pakistan for air and ground lines of communication into Afghanistan.

Although Pakistani cooperation is necessary for a stable security transition, it would be unwise to rely too heavily on the hope that the Pakistani military will change its current strategy towards Afghanistan or the United States in the near term. What is most important where Pakistan is concerned, therefore, is that the Administration and the Congress shed their illusions about what can be expected from either Islamabad or Rawalpindi. The history of the last decade proves abundantly that a genuinely strategic partnership between the United States and Pakistan will remain beyond reach for some time to come. The U.S.-Pakistan relationship—unfortunately—will remain “transactional” in the foreseeable future, irrespective of whether either side chooses to acknowledge it—and this condition will persist so long as the Pakistani military continues to dominate the commanding heights of national decision-making within the country. While U.S. policy may not be able to transform Pakistani behavior—and the last few years provide proof positive—it should at least cease to subsidize Rawalpindi’s egregious conduct through the frittering away of resources provided at pains by the American taxpayer. At the very least, therefore, a new policy towards Pakistan must include:

- Terminating all U.S. transfers of conventional warfighting equipment that have no relevance to Pakistani counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations and which are financed by American taxpayers.
- Reviewing the expenditures related to Coalition Support Funds, with the intent of replacing such transfers over time with direct counterterrorism assistance provided for meeting specified counterterrorism targets.
- Continuing U.S. civilian aid to Pakistan for a while longer but conditioning it on Pakistan’s support for accelerated South Asian economic integration and structural changes in its state capacity to mobilize domestic resources.
- Supporting the civilian government in Pakistan more forthrightly despite its serious current weaknesses.

None of these policy changes by themselves will suffice to transform Pakistan into a successful state or to shift the Pakistani military’s current strategies in more helpful directions. But they will signal the limits of American patience and spare the American taxpayer the indignity of having to subsidize Pakistani state actions that directly threaten American lives and interests, while at the same time, hopefully providing Pakistan with an opportunity to pause and reflect on whether provoking a dangerous rupture in its relations with the United States advances its own regional position and improves its security.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, for your kind attention and your consideration.

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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3. Date of Committee hearing:					
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