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

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Ladies and Gentleman,

It is an honor to be back here at the Harvard Kennedy School. I am grateful to HKS and NDU/NESA for inviting me here. I am especially grateful to General Tad Oelstrom and Ambassador James Larocco for their support and friendship. It is a pleasure to see friends and many people that I've known for years.

I would like to discuss the impact of regional cooperation and the role of our neighbors and regional powers as one significant pillar of a long-term strategy to stabilize Afghanistan.

First, let's discuss the current strategies of the U.S., NATO and the Taliban:

The Taliban strategy is to control the population, drive out coalition forces; defeat the ANSF; and undermine the Afghan Government. They continue to exploit civilian casualties from ISAF operations, whether real or not, to discredit the Government of Afghanistan and convince Afghans that ISAF and NATO withdrawal is imminent, and the Taliban's return to power is inevitable.

The NATO strategy is achieve six objectives:

1) protect the population; 2) develop the ANSF; 3) neutralize insurgent networks; 4) neutralize criminal patronage networks; 5) support development of legitimate governance; 6) support sustainable socio-economic development.

The current U.S. strategy is to deny safe haven to al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and to degrade the Taliban insurgency in order to provide time and space to increase the capacity of the ANSF and the Afghan Government to assume the full combat role by the end of 2014.

The new mid-term strategy for ending or reducing the U.S. combat role will be formulated in President Obama's upcoming speech in July 2011. I hope such a strategy will include at least four pillars that General Doug Lute will also discuss. 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. 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 declaration with the Afghan government to serve as an insurance policy to support the two forgoing objective and to discourage the neighboring countries from filing in a vacuum left by military disengagement. The fourth pillar is to enhance regional cooperation and deal with Pakistan.

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 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 with lucrative access to foreign funds. 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. The killing of Osama bin Laden has affected the morale of the top leadership of the Taliban.

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 has 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.

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. As such, 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 and regional powers 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 these issues drive 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.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Degrading the Taliban is now the prime objective, not defeating them. Progress has been made to achieve this goal in the south. We will not have a large-scale, 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 target killing of Afghans as they lose ground on the front lines. This year, detailed plans are being developed to transition the security responsibility to Afghans and reduce the United States' combat role.

The *intequal*, or transition, is intended to be a conditions-based, irreversible process. It is governed by seven core principles: First, the transition recommendations will be based on the conditions on the ground. Transition is a bottom-up process, not an event; Second, the transfer of security will take place at the district level and progress to the provincial level; Third, as ANSF capabilities develop, ISAF will thin its forces in certain locations as conditions allow, and progressively shift from a partnering to a mentoring relationship that supports continued ANSF professionalization; Fourth, the headquarters elements will be retained, even as combat elements thin-out, to facilitate and enable ANSF operations; Fifth, as ANSF forces thin-out in one district or area, some of that "transition dividend" will be reinvested in other contiguous geographic areas or in the training effort to accelerate or enhance transition; Sixth, transition does not simply apply to geographic areas—it will also apply to key Afghan Government institutions and functions such as Provincial Reconstruction Teams; Last, the seventh principle is to ensure transition will be irreversible.

The transition of security responsibilities now is successfully underway. NATO and the Afghan government are working to implement the foregoing plan 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.

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 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. Despite the latest public relations effort, we are still in the “talking about talking” stage.

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. 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.

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.

The Afghan government must make reconciliation a national agenda. A “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, and a group of 10 relatively unknown women.

However, there has not been much substance in the Peace Council. The Council is perceived to be unaware of the real contacts and meetings that are carried out by the President and Deputy Chief of Intelligence. So far, the negotiations are fear and survival driven rather than being based on a clear national 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.

Reintegration is mismanaged and underfunded. Governor Waisin told the Taliban this week to wait a while before reconciling because the government is not ready. In one training course for former Taliban, 42 out of 50 were actually criminals and only the remaining 8 were former Taliban. There is no vetting process. 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.

Therefore, we need unity of purpose and a national 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.

For the first time, discussion about the nature and depth of a new 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.

Most importantly, 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 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 future of Afghanistan beyond 2014. I recently met with a number of parliamentarians on my last trip. Unfortunately, the quality of the delegates has deteriorated.

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 military forces need moral support and 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 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. They expect mutual respect from their neighbors.

IV. Fourth Pillar: Regional Cooperation

The long-term stability and security of Afghanistan is determined by the dynamics of the regional cooperation and rivalries, especially the negative or constructive influence of Afghanistan's neighbors.

For the sake of stability in Afghanistan and security in the region, Pakistan has a pivotal role to play to end financial, ideological and logistical support for the Taliban and to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

Most Afghans are pursuing friendly relations with Pakistan based on a foundation of mutual interest, mutual respect, mutual trust and trilateral coordination with the U.S. and NATO of all efforts in the civilian-military and intelligence spheres. We want stronger trade, transit and investment ties and deepened economic relations with Pakistan to support regional stability. We want a new Afghanistan linked to its neighbors through a growing trade, commerce and economic reintegration plan.

However, there are significant hurdles to reaching our vision. The history of our relations is fraught with negative perceptions on both sides, and many in Afghanistan view Pakistan's pursuit of strategic depth to result in a weak, dependent Afghanistan rather than an equal partner. To date, efforts on both sides have yielded some progress in improving this relationship. Afghanistan wants Pakistan to benefit from the unique economic opportunities in the region; for Pakistan leadership to think more economically than politically. There are tremendous opportunities for Pakistan to benefit from economic reintegration of the region. We must address together the challenges of unemployment and the poor quality of education instead of supporting and tolerating extremist groups in a zero sum game.

India remains committed to development efforts in Afghanistan. India continues to be one of Afghanistan's largest assistance donors, providing over \$3B for major projects such as electricity generation and transmission, road construction and developing institutions of higher education. India was not fully on board with the reconciliation process. However, last week Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared in a speech in the Afghan parliament that he supports negotiation with the Taliban.

As a neighboring country, Iran continues to pursue active policies to influence events in Afghanistan through overt support for the Afghan government, economic and cultural outreach, and covert support for various insurgent and political opposition groups, including money, weapons and training. Iran seeks a withdrawal of foreign military forces and aims to play a dominant, long-term role in Afghanistan and the region, despite the fact that there is no love relationship between Tehran and the Taliban.

China has two primary interests in Afghanistan: security and trade. Beijing's economic interest in Afghanistan is likely to deepen, particularly if the security situation continues to improve. Pakistan is seeking an increased role for China in Afghanistan and Pakistan as an alternative to U.S. presence. China has been careful not to enter into this rivalry.

Chinese companies are investing in Afghanistan, but progress is slow on the largest project, the Aynak copper mine in Logar Province. The deal, signed in May 2008, also includes construction of a 400-megawatt coal-fired power plant, a freight railway running through Tajikistan to Afghanistan. However, security and other concerns have stalled progress.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia are playing a careful and constructive role in stabilizing efforts.

When considering Russia, President Dmitry Medvedev recognizes that Afghanistan remains a "common cause" between Russia and NATO. For Russia, minimizing the threat an unstable Afghanistan poses to Central Asia is linked to ISAF's mission success. However, a certain degree of mistrust and nervousness about the success of NATO close to what Russia considers to be its traditional sphere of influence is evident. With the prospect that a stable and secure Afghanistan will prevent the spread of extremism and the flow of narcotics into Central Asia, Russia can play a more active and constructive role in Afghanistan.

Ladies and Gentleman,

To conclude, a new four-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 new strategy will depend on a long-term, integrated vision for by Afghans 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 Afghanistan to be stabilized. Today in Afghanistan, if you have a vision, the government recommends that you see an optician or a doctor!

Thank you.