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**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**

*Prepared Statement of Lieutenant General David W. Barno, USA (Ret.)
Senior Advisor and Senior Fellow, Center for a New American Security*

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you very much for granting me the opportunity to testify today. I am honored to take part in this session.

In my Congressional testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee (February 2009), HASC Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs (March 2009), and full House Armed Services Committee (April 2009, July 2011), I had the opportunity to outline my assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan and offer some prescriptions. This report is drawn from impressions gathered on a just completed seven-day visit to Afghanistan, updating my earlier perspective and looking at the road ahead.

Progress Amidst a Changing U.S. Strategic Context

In early 2009, it became evident the international effort in Afghanistan was “drifting toward failure” and success could be achieved only if dramatic changes were applied — most of all, a dramatic re-assertion of American leadership. Success required “Leadership plus Strategy plus Resources.” In 2009, our efforts were falling deeply short in all three components of this equation.

While much has changed in Afghanistan since 2009, even more has changed in the global strategic context for the United States – the arena within which the Afghan conflict is being fought. The impacts of the U.S. housing, auto and financial meltdowns in late 2008 continue to be keenly felt domestically today. U.S. debt and deficits have reached unprecedented levels, impacting our ability to sustain costly military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in ways not felt even two years ago. In Europe, the Eurozone economic crisis combined with deep declines in military spending across the NATO alliance offer scant support for any expectation that the United States will get more out of our allies, the uneven NATO performance in Libya notwithstanding. Osama bin Laden has been killed in a daring U.S. strike into the heart of Pakistan that calls into deep question the efficacy of our fraught ally in Islamabad. The American people are weary of war, and polls indicate majorities of Americans favor ending the Afghan war rapidly. Around the world, friends and allies worry about a United States in decline, and seek reassurance about the long-term U.S. commitment to sustained engagement as a global leader as they view our economic troubles with grave concern. As a nation, the United States is clearly navigating in much different waters today than two years ago – and our policies in Afghanistan must be shaped in light of these indisputable facts.

That said, the United States continues to have vital national security interests at stake in South and Central Asia – interests that transcend Afghanistan itself. The vital importance of protecting these interests must not become obscured by a too-narrow focus on Afghanistan or on our impending

drawdown there. *In fact, our drawdown must be shaped with the ultimate protection of long-term vital U.S. interests foremost.*

Protecting three vital U.S. security interests should dominate our thinking as we begin to drawdown forces in Afghanistan: 1) Preventing the region's use as a base for terror groups to attack the United States and our allies 2) Ensuring nuclear weapons do not fall into the hands of terrorists and 3) Preventing a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. Protecting these vital U.S. interests in the coming years must be the penultimate objective of our coming transition in Afghanistan. If the outcome of this transition ultimately puts these vital U.S. interests at grave risk, we will have failed entirely in our mission in Afghanistan – one that has cost the United States over 1,400 lives, hundreds of billions of dollars and over ten years of great sacrifice.

The Situation: Fall 2011

An assessment of our efforts in Afghanistan in November 2011 suggests re-examining the three variables of the success equation posed in early 2009. In each of these variables – leadership, strategy and resources – the United States has dramatically improved its position in the last two-plus years. Generals Stanley McChrystal, David Petraeus and now John Allen have brought immense talent and counter-insurgency experience to bear in Afghanistan, and their exceptional military leadership has had a markedly positive effect on the war. At the same time, our strategy has shifted from a muddled, NATO-centric “don’t fracture the alliance” approach to one focused on counter-insurgency principles, tailored for the unique environment of Afghanistan, and infused with assertive American leadership of the heretofore fractured multi-national effort. Finally, resources have been increased dramatically, enabling this new leadership armed with a new strategy to make substantial gains toward a successful outcome. President Bush began, and President Obama dramatically increased, a major reinforcement of troops shifting the U.S. component from 33,000 to nearly 100,000 troops on the ground today. Our allies have also increased their numbers during this period, although in limited ways that are now declining. Aid and development dollars have grown, and increased numbers of civilians have deployed to work with the U.S. military in the counter-insurgency effort. The combination of these significant changes in leadership, strategy and resources have turned around a mission that was clearly on the road to failure in early 2009 – reversing a period of decline wherein the whole of NATO’s effect was far less than the sum of its parts, and one in which the Taliban had escalated their attacks and seized the initiative, putting NATO on its back foot. In notable ways, much of this has now changed.

An infusion of nearly 70,000 additional U.S. troops has dramatically reversed the Taliban’s momentum and taken away their de facto control of large swathes of southern Afghanistan, notably Kandahar and Helmand provinces, the birthplace of the Taliban. The results of fighting in the East have been more mixed, largely as a result of coalition efforts directing the military “main effort” to the south. Major upticks in “kinetic” operations targeting the Taliban leadership have badly damaged the continuity of the organization, while creating important leverage toward bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. While the ultimate effect of this campaign against the diverse groups that comprise the Taliban is not yet certain, there is little question that sustained military pressure remains a crucial component in incentivizing any negotiations.

In the areas where the Taliban has been rolled back, Afghan governance has improved, businesses have returned, and prosperity and personal security notably improved. Sustaining these fragile and hard-won gains will likely prove to be the top challenge of 2012 and beyond – and will ultimately be a central test for growing Afghan security forces and government. Americans cannot secure these gains over the long haul — only Afghans can.

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have also dramatically grown and improved during this period. Under the dynamic leadership of Lt. General Bill Caldwell, commander of NATO Training Mission - Afghanistan, the ANSF now comprise 164,000 Army and 126,000 police, up from 79,000 and 95,000 respectively in early 2009. More importantly, their quality, training and equipment has steadily improved, posturing them to take on the counter-insurgency fight as the U.S. transition begins this summer and continues into next year and beyond.

Yet while the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan today has largely seized the battlefield initiative from the Taliban, serious difficulties remain. Sustaining the success of the last 18 months will be perhaps even more problematic than the campaign that has wrenched the momentum away from the enemy, and now has put him on his back foot. Corruption and lack of Afghan capacity remain crippling problems, and little progress has emerged in these areas. Next door, relations between the United States and Pakistan have declined to perhaps their lowest point in recent memory, a development that will have immense potential influence on the shape of the next several years in Afghanistan. Similarly, cross-border tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan remain a significant barrier to a comprehensive regional security framework.

As General Allen and Ambassador Ryan Crocker now fully take charge of this effort, they face major challenges. The United States is well served by having these two incredibly skilled and experienced professionals at the helm in Afghanistan during this critical period. America has chosen well in selecting these two dedicated and exceptional leaders – and their talents are about to be tried.

Observations

Some observations from my recent trip outline the scope of the challenges:

Success and End Game: It is unclear whether the United States or the international community in Afghanistan has an adequately clear definition of the end state of the conflict which equates to “success.” Disparate outlooks on where we are going, what is “Afghan good enough,” what is acceptable or unacceptable in terms of outcomes on corruption, women’s rights, democratic government, local reconciliation, militias permeate all aspects of our effort. The lack of an agreed-upon long term U.S. presence undercuts our claims of enduring commitment. Deep uncertainty about the long-term seriousness of the U.S. commitment colors every aspect of our involvement, and distorts judgments by friends and foes alike about our staying power in the region.

Sustainability: Nearly all U.S. commanders commenting on the success that has been achieved in recent months will note that gains are “fragile and reversible.” Often unspoken is the fundamental reality that

gains, often achieved at significant cost in blood and treasure by U.S. forces, must ultimately be sustained by Afghan national security forces (ANSF). Yet while there is an energetic program in place to recruit, train, organize and equip Afghan forces, there is much less evidence of a forcefully led structure designed to advise ANSF forces in combat operations, and maximize their effectiveness. This responsibility is largely borne today by conventional U.S. combat units – and the result is that U.S. units, normally on one year or seven month tours, concentrate on completing the mission assigned during their tour, largely without the Afghans playing a central role. Afghan security forces must be more rapidly and more widely placed into the lead for COIN efforts; if they fall short, now is the time to find that out and adjust our training and advisory effort accordingly. If the COIN mission cannot be performed successfully by ANSF, all of our gains are not sustainable.

Transition to Afghan Lead: The definition and commonly understood grass roots meaning of “transition” in Afghanistan needs refinement. When will U.S. troops no longer be able to conduct independent combat operations without a police warrant? When will U.S. combat units no longer be allowed to operate off their bases? How is Transition to Lead Security Responsibility (TLSR) different from the transition and consolidation driven by U.S. troop reductions? I posed this question during my recent trip: “How will this U.S. infantry battalion’s mission change after transition? Answer: “It won’t.” Needless to say, that response tells a confusing story.

Organizing Toward a Primary Advisory Role: A large infusion of U.S. forces and dollars since early 2009 has created an “American ecosystem” in parts of the south and southwest of Afghanistan, notably in the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. A crucial test of the gains experienced in these areas will be whether the Afghan government and security forces can maintain this elaborate system with far fewer dollars and in the face of the reality that U.S. troops will no longer be in the lead. In my judgment, a much greater investment needs to be made by U.S. forces now in enabling the Afghans to take lead, sooner. Organizing major parts of the remaining U.S. force more clearly toward the “Advise and Assist” mission is needed sooner, not later. If U.S. units were “handing off” their battlespace at the end of their current 9-month or 12-month tours to ANSF (as opposed to American) combat units, our approach would be radically different in terms of developing those very same ANSF units. Put another way, if rotation back to the United States was contingent on the status of training and readiness of local ANSF units to take over, the focus of current U.S. units on their counterparts would change markedly toward better preparing the Afghans. We need to redirect and accelerate these efforts.

Time for a Mission Change?: The current mission of U.S./ISAF forces in Afghanistan is COIN – directly leading military operations designed to protect the population and degrade the Taliban. This mission statement drives all manner of decisions from deployments of troops to determining the composition of the remaining force after the surge of 33,000 is withdrawn by October 2012. As long as “COIN” is the primary U.S. mission, American units will be taking the field determined to attack the Taliban and provide wide area security – and ANSF will remain in the back seat. Changing the U.S. mission no later than fall of 2012 to “security force assistance” rather than “COIN” will shift the U.S. main effort to a central focus on training, advising and enabling the ANSF. This will accelerate a shift to a more indirect

approach by U.S. conventional units, and allow for a “test drive” of ANSF capabilities while we retain sufficient forces to backstop and adjust to identified shortfalls.

NATO: While non-U.S. NATO nations and nearly two dozen other countries provide various forms of military capability in Afghanistan, the “tax” upon U.S. forces to sustain these commitments as we begin to draw down our forces may become prohibitive. From the substantial amount of senior leader time devoted to “coalition maintenance” to the U.S. military resources (medevac, ISR, helicopter lift) set aside to enable NATO allies to conduct basic military missions, the cost of this portion of the effort is growing, not shrinking. NATO forces unable to provide largely self-sufficient forces outside of the primary combat zones (e.g. the North and West) should not be drawing from an ever-decreasing pool of U.S. assets in a drawdown period for their basic support. NATO structural requirements also contribute to vast headquarters bureaucracy across all NATO formations, thousands of whom never “leave the wire.” ISAF HQ today boasts 38 NATO generals, twelve times the number found in the U.S. HQ that ISAF replaced in 2007.

Afghan National Security Forces: An effective ANSF will ultimately be the ticket for U.S. combat forces to come home from Afghanistan. An ANSF enabled with U.S. advisors and access to other U.S. “enablers” – fires, air support, and logistics – will increasingly assume the direct COIN mission from U.S. combat forces in coming years. However, the very large number of U.S. combat forces now in Afghanistan now perversely mitigate against giving ANSF that mission – Americans can simply do it faster and better. U.S. forces need to look at reorganization in order to create a military structure that is first and foremost empowered and resourced to get Afghans into the COIN fight – not simply fight that fight ourselves while the Afghans are often largely on the sidelines. The overall U.S. advisory effort in Afghanistan today is fragmented, non-standard, decentralized and largely lacking any bureaucratic power or centralized senior leadership. A designated advisory command needs to be considered to give the vital advise and assist effort the senior leadership, resources and priority that is required for the next phase of the war.

Special Forces and the Village Stability Program: The Combined Forces Special Operations Command-Afghanistan has refined and grown local security force program known as the Village Stability Program (VSP), training and mentoring a growing number of Afghan Local Police. While this program is controversial in some circles (including President Karzai), in my judgment it offers the best prospect for local ownership of village security. It also provides a sustainable model that can be expanded and overseen by small numbers of U.S. Special Forces as the direct combat role of U.S. forces winds down. Its current cap of 30,000 should be expanded and its funding increased as a cost effective way to provide security owned by Afghan local leaders.

The Quetta Shura Taliban: The QST is on their back foot in southern and southwestern Afghanistan. They have been driven out of areas in which they traditionally held sway, and have been roughly rebuffed by U.S. forces in their attempts to reclaim this territory over the last five months. However, they remain resilient, adaptable to new tactics such as assassinations and high visibility attacks, and largely find a protected sanctuary for their senior leadership in Pakistan. They are biding their time for “the day after the Americans are gone.” In many areas, local fighters can often be generated at will for Taliban activities

in response to the “invaders”; charting the locations where detainees are captured highlights the preponderant numbers captured close to their homes. The Afghan government is in a competition with the Taliban for security and governance. This competition revolves around two key questions: Can the ANSF sustain security gains made over the last 18 months, and can the Afghan government out-govern the Taliban during and after the U.S. drawdown?

Haqqani Network: The HQN remains the most dangerous of the insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan, and is largely based in the Waziristan tribal areas of Pakistan. Most accounts attribute the bulk of recent deadly attacks in Kabul and elsewhere in eastern Afghanistan to the Haqqanis. This organization is highly lethal and closely tied to al Qaeda. Given the limited U.S. ability to act directly against the Haqqanis in Pakistan, and in light of Pakistan’s inability or unwillingness to do so, the United States must look to leverage all the tools at our disposal to degrade and undermine this group. The formal designation of the Haqqani Network as a Foreign Terrorist Organization would allow the full force of international law to be brought against them and their supporters. This needs to happen as soon as possible, and be extended to any facilitators of their terrorist efforts as well.

Pakistan: Building on the experiences of my week-long trip to Pakistan in January 2011, I judge the current outlook as mixed. Pakistan continues to operate on multiple conflicting fronts, hedging against a future without a significant international and U.S. presence in Afghanistan. They remain utterly paranoid about Indian involvement in Afghanistan, and see the Taliban as a proxy against Indian support for the former northern alliance (and Baluch separatists that threaten Islamabad). An unstable Afghanistan may be seen as a better outcome for Pakistan than an Afghanistan with a large, well-equipped army that is supported by India. Pakistan is increasingly worried about the Haqqani Network and has been publicly quiescent about reported covert efforts by the U.S. to attack HQN. Iran and Pakistan may be complicit in undermining Afghan stability and hedging against U.S. goals.

Afghan Government Corruption: There is little positive to report on this front despite significant efforts by ISAF and the U.S. embassy. In my estimation, few substantive and lasting dents have been made in the pervasive corruption of Afghan government at most if not all levels. Massive infusions of U.S. dollars for development have fueled massive corruption on an unprecedented scale. One modest area of solid improvement is the new ISAF focus on military contracting standards and corruption avoidance in these large dollar enterprises.

The Afghan Economy and Stability: The removal beginning later this year of substantial numbers of troops and the support dollars and contracts that accompany them has potential to cause a dramatic recession in the Afghan economy. A sizeable portion of Afghan GDP is driven by these international contracts. The years 2012 through the end of 2014 will see major volatility in western military spending as bases are closed and consolidated, contracts finished, support staff dismissed and the 2009-2011 surge in western military spending reversed. It is unclear what effect this will have on the overall Afghan economy, on youth employment (especially in urban areas such as Kabul) or on nation-wide stability writ large. One issue to monitor carefully is whether a surge of unemployment linked to the military drawdown could create conditions of severe political unrest.

“Campaign Continuity:” Ten years into the war, the degree to which “first year enthusiasm” permeates all military and embassy efforts is striking. Six to seven month or even one year tours have guaranteed that military units and U.S. civilians will never accumulate a longitudinal perspective on the long arc of Afghan events- the “ten one year wars” phenomenon is pervasive. One senior U.S. civilian with a rare 18 months in Afghanistan described it: “It would be comical if it were not tragic. People spend 12 months rolling the boulder up the hill only to see it roll back to the bottom when they go home. The next group arrives and then spends eight months trying to decide how to move the boulder.” Army units continue to arrive in Afghanistan on their first tour of duty, to include two- and three-star headquarters. While combat units at brigade and below arguably require force-wide rotation to maintain equity for arduous close combat duty, the same cannot be said of flag headquarters. This fair sharing of deployments has steepened the learning curve of units already dealing with the continuity challenge of one year (or less) rotations. Few military units we encountered had any visibility on events in their battlespace more than eighteen months in the past.

Troop Morale: Ten years into a very hard fight, the U.S. military deployed in Afghanistan – Army, Marines, Air Force, Navy – is a superbly trained and well-led force. Their morale is high, and they continue to take the fight to the enemy aggressively every single day. These are arguably the most militarily proficient units we have ever fielded – aggressive, focused, tactically skilled, agile and immensely professional. All Americans should be proud of these young men and women —they deserve our full support and undimmed admiration for as long as we ask them to sustain this very tough fight. They are true American heroes, and every one of us stands in their debt for their gritty everyday courage and their personal sacrifices.

Conclusion

While significant success has been achieved by U.S. and NATO forces since 2009, whether the Afghan government and security forces can sustain these gains is open to question. Accelerating the ANSF ownership of this fight while sufficient U.S. and NATO forces remain available to backstop shortfalls and adapt to problems is a needed corrective. The drawdown of U.S. forces has in fact provided a forcing function for the U.S. military headquarters to realign and re-prioritize its efforts, shaving headquarters and staff and focusing on critical tasks. However, the enemy has not been defeated, merely set back on his heels. Whether he remains knocked out or not will ultimately be determined by the fighting spirit and capabilities of Afghan security forces – not U.S. or NATO troops. One (or more) additional fighting seasons with U.S. forces in the lead is unlikely to change that equation substantively – especially given the external sanctuary enjoyed by the Taliban, and their demonstrated resilience and adaptability. It is time to consider a change of mission for U.S. forces effective no later than October of 2012, aimed at the long-term advise and assist requirement. The U.S. military needs to look closely at how to re-organize its remaining 68,000 forces today. We must find out sooner, rather than later, if the ANSF with U.S. advisory support and enablers can be an effective COIN force, and sustain the hard-won gains of the last two years. Only if the ANSF can effectively fight to sustain these will this entire effort ultimately be a sustainable one, and can U.S. policy objectives be met.



Biography

Lieutenant General David W. Barno, USA (Ret.) **Senior Advisor and Senior Fellow, Center for a New American Security**



General Barno, a highly decorated military officer with over 30 years of service, has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the United States and around the world, to include command at every level. He served many of his early years in special operations forces with Army Ranger battalions, to include combat in both the Grenada and Panama invasions. In 2003, he was selected to establish a new three-star operational headquarters in Afghanistan and take command of the 20,000 U.S. and Coalition Forces in Operation Enduring Freedom. For 19 months in this position, he was responsible for the overall military leadership of this complex political-military mission, devising a highly innovative counterinsurgency strategy in close partnership with the U.S. embassy and coalition allies. His responsibilities included regional military efforts with neighboring nations and involved close coordination with the

Government of Afghanistan, the United Nations, NATO International Security Assistance Force, the U.S. Department of State and USAID, and the senior military leaders of many surrounding nations and numerous allies.

From 2006-2010, General Barno served as the Director of the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. Concurrently, he was the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans and Families from 2007-2009. He frequently serves as an expert consultant on counterinsurgency and irregular warfare, professional military education and the changing character of conflict, supporting a wide-range of government and other organizations. General Barno is widely published and has testified before Congress numerous times.

A 1976 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, General Barno also earned his master's degree in National Security Studies from Georgetown University. He is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and the U.S. Army War College. General Barno has received numerous awards for his military and public service.