

**Written Testimony of Dr. Colin F. Jackson
to the Senate Armed Services Committee**

February 11, 2020

Chairman Inhofe, Ranking Member Reed, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to discussing the challenges facing us in Afghanistan. My comments today are strictly my own and do not reflect the views of the Administration, the Department of Defense, the Department of the Navy, or the U.S. Naval War College. I hope my testimony can shed some light on the connection between the South Asia Strategy and the opportunities risks ahead in Afghanistan and the region and I look forward to addressing your questions.

The South Asia Strategy, Reconciliation, and the Prospects for Afghanistan

U.S. leaders today face two seemingly antithetical imperatives in Afghanistan. The first is the entirely understandable desire to bring a nearly two-decade war to an end. The costs of the war, human as well as financial, have far outstripped the expectations of 2001 and the emergence of great power competition with China and Russia suggests that scarce U.S. resources might be better spent on these priorities. At the same time, the imperative of protecting the American homeland from terrorist attack remains unchanged. We still face a very real and substantial threat of external attack by salafi jihadi groups emanating from South and Central Asia and this threat will not go away anytime soon. Although Al Qaeda has been battered in the years since 2001, it is not dead and its leadership remains focused on external attacks on the U.S. and its allies. Al Qaeda's longstanding alliances with local militants including the Taliban and the Haqqani network make Afghanistan and Pakistan areas of outsized importance. The rise of ISIS-Khorasan in eastern Afghanistan and areas of Pakistan poses a distinct threat not only to U.S. and foreign forces but also to the populations of the West. Any responsible policy and strategy on Afghanistan must address both of these imperatives. This is what has made the resolution of the war so challenging and has led three administrations to step back from the illusion of simple endgames.

Complexity is not synonymous with hopelessness. The South Asia Strategy of August 2017 offers a framework within which the U.S. can either manage the terrorism problem at acceptable cost or bring the war to a reasonable and lasting political settlement consistent with U.S. national interests. Real progress has been made in reducing the cost of the war and increasing the capability of the U.S., allied, and Afghan forces engaged there. We are almost a decade removed from the surge and its sweeping ambitions to reform Afghanistan; what we see on the ground today is a focused, highly efficient counterterrorism campaign executed by Afghan security forces in conjunction with very small numbers of U.S. and allied advisors and counterterrorism forces. The salient question in 2020 is whether the U.S. political leadership of both parties has the patience and foresight to see this campaign through to a favorable conclusion and avoid the temptation of a hasty, phony peace.

The South Asia Strategy

One of the greatest contributions of the South Asia Strategy of August 2017 was its laudably clear articulation of the ends, ways, and means of the campaign in Afghanistan. For the first time the U.S. established a negotiated, settlement inclusive of the Taliban as the political objective. Equally important, the strategy explicitly rejected the timelines that had undermined the impact of the Obama era investments in the surge and transition. Instead, the South Asia Strategy argued that the resolution of the war would be conditions based – we would wage a focused, military campaign as long as necessary to obtain a favorable political settlement from the American point of view.

The new strategy also marked a shift in the ways the U.S. sought to defeat terrorist groups and bring the war to a successful conclusion. The U.S. sought to deny the Taliban the ability to seize major population centers and to punish them by increasing the offensive striking power of the Afghan security forces. By imposing a “mutually hurting stalemate” on the Taliban, and credibly threatening to maintain or increase the pressure indefinitely, the U.S. sought to compel the Taliban to negotiate and rejoin the political process. The strategy also placed heavy pressure on Pakistan. If the defining feature of the war in Afghanistan has been the physical insulation of the Taliban senior leadership inside settled Pakistan, then the U.S. had to press Pakistan to reduce its active and passive support to the movement. Only by negating sanctuary and shaking the confidence of Taliban leadership could the U.S. hope to translate military effects in Afghanistan into a change in Taliban calculus and drive them towards good faith negotiations. Throughout this process, U.S. counterterrorism and intelligence forces waged a parallel campaign against transnational terrorist groups including Al Qaeda and ISIS-K.

The South Asia Strategy also changed the means applied to the problem. The most obvious change was the introduction of roughly 4,000 additional advisors to increase the offensive striking power of the Afghan security forces. Equally important, the U.S. decided to shift critical enablers from other areas of CENTCOM to Afghanistan. These included lift assets, ISR platforms, and artillery and aircraft to enable Afghan forces to increase the tempo of offensive operations. Finally, GEN Nicholson directed a doubling of the size of the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) in recognition that those commando, police special units, and high end counterterrorism forces were the primary instruments of offensive operations. The expansion in ASSF, combined with a tripling of the Afghan Air Force (including UH-60, A-29, and MD-530 acquisitions), would enable the Afghans to increase the scale and tempo of operations against the Taliban.

Assessing the South Asia Strategy

Almost as soon as the strategy was announced, Secretary Mattis directed the Department to develop a means of assess its progress. The framework we developed broke the assessment into three logical elements: inputs, outputs, and outcomes. The external inputs of the strategy were mostly complete by the spring of 2018. The dispatch of additional advisors under the first Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) and provision of critical enablers gave the Afghans the wherewithal to shift from ineffective and vulnerable defensive positions to focused offensive

operations. The expansion of the Afghan Special Security Forces and the Afghan Air Force proceeded more slowly but were successful and are largely complete. In tandem with these efforts inside Afghanistan, the U.S. suspended security assistance to Pakistan and made clear its insistence that Pakistan curtail Taliban activity and cooperate in the U.S. push for a political settlement. The appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as the Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation (SRAR) signaled the seriousness of the U.S. commitment to that end.

Predictably, the outputs of the strategy took substantially longer to emerge and the results were more mixed. The U.S. push to get the ANDSF out of defensive check points and into expanded offensive operations ran into organizational and political obstacles. GEN Nicholson and later GEN Miller labored to replace a raft of ineffective Afghan leaders and install younger and more energetic ones from the Ministries to the tactical level. The success of the Afghan Special Security Forces led to their overuse and deterioration; Afghan political and military leaders often sent these units as “fire brigades” to various threatened areas only to see them pinned down indefinitely in static roles. Resolving this problem and putting these high end Afghan units into a functioning “operational readiness cycle” consumed a considerable amount of time and political capital. The U.S. initiative to get Afghan security forces out of vulnerable, static check points collided with the political incentives of Afghan political leaders to secure various local constituencies. While U.S. leadership persuaded senior Afghan leadership of the importance of this shift, the basic tension between the military need to increase focused and coherent offensive operations and the political demands for population and territorial control set up a tug of war that is likely to endure.

The battle between the Afghan government and the Taliban was also expressed in terms of control of population, territory, and urban areas. Under GEN Nicholson, the campaign was framed in terms of expanding the government’s control over the population. Under GEN Miller, the focus shifted from the pursuit of population or territorial control to a search for leverage in the negotiations with the Taliban. As the prospect of political negotiations loomed, the U.S. and the Taliban increased the intensity of their respective offensive operations. The result of this contest for has been a very violent, battlefield impasse; the Taliban has been largely unable to seize and hold major population centers or provincial capitals while the Afghan security forces have been unable to displace the Taliban from their rural strongholds. While some have characterized this as a “stalemate,” the government unquestionably controls the better half; control of the five major cities of Afghanistan brings control over the future of Afghanistan. The Taliban remains capable of launching terrorist attacks and interrupting movement along major roads; the Afghan security forces, with the support of U.S. and allied advisors, can launch offensive operations and achieve tactical overmatch in almost every engagement. Paradoxically, the inability of either side to win outright on the battlefield, and the mounting costs to both sides, provide powerful, first-order incentives for political negotiation.

At the same time that the Afghan security forces and U.S. advisors have focused on maximizing leverage in future political negotiations, those same forces have been waging a sustained counterterrorism campaign against ISIS-K in several areas of Afghanistan. While the U.S. accepts that the war with the Taliban must end in some inclusive political settlement, the

U.S. has concluded that ISIS-K, like Al Qaeda, has no place in a future, Afghan political order. ISIS-K has proven highly resilient, absorbing large numbers of casualties in the face of sustained military operations by the Afghans and the U.S.. ISIS-K has attracted recruits from both the Taliban and other militant groups; the same ideology and tactics demonstrated in Iraq and Syria have allowed ISIS-K to capture the mantle of hard-line, salafi jihadi resistance in the region. While the Taliban sees ISIS-K as a political and military rival, and has fought with the group for territorial control in multiple areas, U.S. and Afghan counterterrorism operations are the primary reason ISIS-K has been held in check. The removal of that bulwark would expose the Taliban to the full force of a very capable and resilient enemy and open the way to external attacks on the West.

The final set of outputs has been pressure on the Taliban leadership and its external patrons. While the Taliban leadership laments the impact of intensified Afghan and U.S. offensive operations, mounting Taliban casualties have not had a decisive impact of the leadership's decision calculus thus far. The senior leadership remains physically insulated from U.S. military action and the group places heavy emphasis on internal unity and consensus. This means that hardliners can veto major changes in Taliban policy and the default of the group is to continue the fight rather than risk internal rupture. U.S. efforts to persuade Pakistan to play a constructive role have been partially successful. In response to hard pressure and persuasion, Pakistan has played an indispensable role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table and there are encouraging signs that Pakistani leadership may be reconsidering the strategic utility of proxy militant groups such as the Taliban and LeT. That said, it remains unclear whether this Pakistani cooperation reflects a genuine commitment to forge a durable and balanced political settlement in Afghanistan or whether it simply hopes to lift U.S. pressure by taking visible first steps in that direction.

If reconciliation has always been the paramount objective of the South Asia Strategy, the military initiatives and political shifts have at the very least created promising openings. President Ghani's February 2018 offer of negotiations without preconditions, followed by the brief Eid ceasefire of August 2018, suggested that a political settlement might be within reach. The resumption of direct talks between the U.S. and the Taliban Political Commission in the fall of 2018 offered an opportunity to explore the feasibility of political settlement.

Whereas the inputs and outputs have been to varying degrees controllable, the outcomes of the strategy have depended to a far larger degree on the interaction of independent actors including the U.S., the Afghan state, the Taliban, and an array of external parties. The simplest outcome – the steady state prevention of additional terrorist attacks outside the region against U.S. and allied homelands – has been successfully accomplished only by maintaining heavy, continuous military and intelligence pressure on ISIS-K and Al Qaeda. At present this success cannot be considered permanent; the removal of U.S. focused counterterrorism surveillance and direct action in Afghanistan would most likely lead to the rapid expansion of ISIS-K and Al Qaeda capabilities and an increasing likelihood of directed or inspired attacks against U.S. and allied homelands.

While the U.S. has made substantial progress in its multi-decade bid to buttress the Afghan state, and the Afghans have assumed human costs of fighting the war, the regime cannot expect to defeat the Taliban and ISIS-K without substantial U.S. financial assistance and some level of military advisory support. President Ghani has been a far more effective and supportive security partner in the fight against the Taliban and ISIS-K than his predecessor President Karzai. But the Afghan economy remains too small and the Afghan revenue system too weak to extract the resources necessary to wage a two-front war without substantial external assistance. What has changed dramatically is the share of the fighting the Afghans have assumed; the campaign in Afghanistan is in the main a story of Afghan security forces fighting against the Taliban and ISIS-K with U.S. and allied forces providing only the key enablers, advice and training to amplify their offensive power and reach.

The Search for Political Settlement: Good Deal, Bad Deal, No Deal

For the past 18 months, the focus of attention has appropriately been on the progress of political reconciliation. It bears restating that it is easier to pursue peace than secure it. Ambassador Khalilzad has faced the monumental task of brokering a durable peace settlement favorable to U.S. interests. He has done so under considerable time pressure from various domestic fronts and in the face of rival powers eager either to stymie a settlement or impose costs on the U.S.. While the outcome of the SRAR's initiative remains uncertain, any judgment of that outcome must focus on the terms of the settlement and its practical enforceability. Any good deal must provide a real rather than rhetorical answer to the enduring threat of salafi jihadi terrorism to the U.S. and allied homelands.

A bad deal with the Taliban has been on offer for years and arguably decades and it remains on offer today. From the 1990s to the present, the Taliban has offered a *modus vivendi* that offers rhetorical assurances that no threats will emerge from Afghanistan in return for non-interference by the West. Under the Taliban regime of the 1990s, the leadership offered sanctuary to Islamist militant groups including Al Qaeda. While the Taliban did not endorse external terrorist operations against the West, neither did it demonstrate a willingness or ability to restrain let alone punish Al Qaeda. This Taliban policy failed to prevent the Embassy attacks of 1998, failed to prevent the attack on the USS Cole, and failed to prevent the attacks of 9/11. Even in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Mullah Omar's regime preferred to lose power rather than break with Al Qaeda and turn over the perpetrators. Careful examination of the Taliban's domestic and foreign policy on militancy reveals how little has changed in the ensuing decades. The new Taliban, like the old Taliban, prefers to offer domestic sanctuary to Islamist militants and rhetorical assurances to the international community rather than break its relationships with these militant fellow travelers.

The opening position of the Taliban in the current talks appears largely unchanged from this longstanding policy. Based on public statements, the Taliban insist on the withdrawal of all foreign forces in advance of any political settlement; in return, they offer vague assurances to prevent future attacks emanating from Afghanistan. Any deal that trades the fact of complete U.S. troop withdrawal for the fiction of Taliban counterterrorism assistance cannot reasonably guarantee the security of the American homeland. In this sense, the President's decision in

September 2019 to walk away from the talks was fundamentally correct. Barring a durable and reasonably comprehensive ceasefire, some level of enduring U.S. military and intelligence presence, and a reasonable political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government in advance of withdrawal, it is hard to see a path that leads to the simultaneous accomplishment of the twin goals of ending the war and safeguarding the American homeland.

Two fundamental threats in any negotiation are desperation and wishful thinking. Secretary Mattis repeatedly insisted that success in the South Asia Strategy depended on avoiding the appearance of desperation. Any opponent that senses his counterparty wants or needs a deal more than he does will be inclined to dig in and wait for concessions. For an array of reasons, public speculation about U.S. timelines and the precedent of U.S. decisions in Syria have reinforced Taliban impressions that time is on their side. This has led them to hold fast to their opening positions, reject meaningful interaction with the Ghani government, and cling to longstanding alliances with militant groups including Al Qaeda. While it is possible that the Taliban senior leadership is ready to engage in domestic power sharing, to make a genuine break with Al Qaeda, and is willing and able to address the ISIS-K threat in conjunction with the U.S., the body of evidence suggests this is highly unlikely.

If the history of Taliban policy provides the outlines of a bad deal, what would constitute a good deal? Any good deal would have to address the existing and projected terrorist threats of ISIS-K and Al Qaeda in more than rhetorical terms. In the short run, this would require some level of U.S. intelligence and military presence until such a time that a future Afghan state can demonstrate it can prevent such attacks. The scale of that U.S. presence could vary considerably based on the performance of the Afghan security forces and the magnitude of the terrorist threat. Such a settlement would also require meaningful power sharing between the existing government and the Taliban. Any Taliban takeover would most likely end in either an unacceptable return to arrangement of the 1990s or a renewed civil war along ethnic or political lines, most likely fueled by the external support of bordering states including Russia, Iran, and Pakistan. Finally, any good deal would require an ability to enforce the terms and not simply monitor their progress or unraveling. Given the track record of the Taliban, Afghan power brokers, and external patrons, enforcement rather than trust must be the rule in the aftermath of any political settlement. Some residual U.S. and allied military presence might play a useful role in deterring the parties from returning to civil war.

If a good deal would require some mix of Afghan power sharing, residual U.S. counterterrorism presence and access, and hard power enforceability, then how might we improve our position in the negotiations? The first step would be to convince the Taliban leadership that we are willing to wage an intense but efficient military campaign as long as necessary to secure an acceptable outcome. Unless we can demonstrate a credible commitment to follow through on a conditions-based approach, we are unlikely to persuade the Taliban to move off their traditional and fundamentally unacceptable policy positions on Islamist militancy in Afghanistan. Second, the U.S. may need to follow Sun Tzu's formula of "attacking the enemy's coalition." If the Taliban refuse to change their positions on a general settlement, it may be reasonable to explore "separate peaces" with Taliban leaders, commanders, and factions.

Some of the leaders most exposed to the brunt of Afghan and U.S. offensive operations inside Afghanistan may be willing to switch allegiances in return for some combination of amnesty and access to status and resources inside the existing Afghan political system. One major challenge here would be to convince the Afghan government that calculated concessions along these lines are risks worth taking. Any splits within the Taliban coalition inside Afghanistan would force the Taliban leadership to reconsider their staying power and by extension their policy positions at the negotiating table.

At the same time, it will become increasingly important to explain to the Pakistani leadership that the future of the bilateral relationship will hinge more on the final outcome in Afghanistan than the opening act. If Pakistan plays a positive role in convening talks, but the end result is a Taliban takeover or subsequent terror attacks in the West, then Pakistan will be held responsible. Both states, for different reasons, have a strong interest in forging a durable rather than a fictive settlement in Afghanistan. Without a lasting settlement, the U.S. cannot afford to disengage completely; without a lasting settlement, Pakistan cannot reasonably ask for renewed American assistance on the military, diplomatic, or economic fronts.

What if we are faced with a choice between a bad deal and no deal? What can easily be lost in the larger narrative of the long war is how much more efficient in blood and treasure our campaign today is than at any other period since 2002; with only 10% of the troops we had at the peak of the surge, we are, with our Afghan allies, inflicting a similar level of damage on the Taliban. We have today a credible security partner in President Ghani who is determined to help the U.S. wage war on the full range of militant groups in the region. The Afghan security forces are capable of denying the Taliban victory on the battlefield and protecting the population centers of Afghanistan. If we cannot reach a deal that meets our core requirements on counterterrorism, we can fall back on a solid foundation of our partnership with the Afghan security forces and refocus our efforts on reducing the human and financial costs of the battlefield deadlock to a minimum. Paradoxically, a credible demonstration of our military ability and political willingness to hold the line and inflict high levels of damage on the Taliban, ISIS-K, and Al Qaeda may be the key to forcing a reassessment by the Taliban leadership. Here again the President's actions in September 2019 loom large. The beginning of wisdom in negotiations is the willingness to walk away. By demonstrating that he preferred no deal to a bad deal, he forced the Taliban to reconsider its positions and its timeline.

Is it worth it?

As General Dunford noted on multiple occasions, insurance is a good metaphor for the dilemma we face today in Afghanistan. We do not get to decide whether we have a substantial threat of terrorism emanating from South and Central Asia; all we have is a decision of how to deal with the threat posed by ISIS-K and Al Qaeda. We could disengage entirely and that would be the equivalent of canceling our terrorism insurance policy: we would save the cost of the insurance premium but we would take on the totality of the future risk. Alternatively, we could continue to try to build the capability of an increasingly competent Afghan security force so that they could continue the fight against the ISIS-K, Al Qaeda, and if need be the Taliban; this is the "whole life" insurance policy we currently pursue. Still another option would be to cut costs by

switching to a “term life” policy in which we focus exclusively on unilateral, U.S. counterterrorism operations and stop building the capacity of our local partners.

Even if insurance is the appropriate analogy, the question of cost remains. Are we overpaying to insure against the terrorism risks we face? There can be no certain answer to this question; the best we can say is that the resilience of Al Qaeda and ISIS-K, and their undiminished desire to strike at the U.S. and its allies, mean that the threat is likely to be real and substantial for the foreseeable future. One temptation might be to switch from our current insurer – the U.S. military and intelligence presence and our Afghan security force partners – in favor of an ostensibly lower cost insurer in the form of a reconciled Taliban. In theory, a functioning counterterrorism agreement with the Taliban might allow us to cut costs by removing our own forces and reducing our financial support for the Afghan security forces. The poison pill here is counterparty risk. Based on their military and political track record, we have few reasons to believe that the Taliban are willing or able to contain the risks posed by Al Qaeda and ISIS-K that will remain in the wake of a successful reconciliation. Under these circumstances, switching insurance providers might deliver us short-term savings at the cost of a medium-term collapse of our solution to the terrorism problem in South and Central Asia.

A more responsible approach to cutting the costs of the insurance policy would be to focus on driving the premiums down. Here the recent initiatives by General Miller point towards an increasingly affordable, steady-state alternative to a premature and problematic deal with the Taliban. General Miller has already demonstrated the ability to cut the U.S. troop footprint and the financial cost of the war while increasing military pressure on the Taliban. While the room for future efficiency gains is finite, the least bad option might be for the U.S. to continue to the insurance premium in Afghanistan to the practical minimum and prepare to wage this increasingly small and efficient counterterrorism campaign until something breaks our way. We should be primed to discuss a deal that meets our minimum requirements but willing to hold the line rather than accept a phony peace. A peace that deserts our allies and enables our enemies to seize power will raise the risks of renewed terrorist attacks on the American homeland by Al Qaeda and ISIS-K. Such an outcome might draw us back into future military operations in the region on far more disadvantageous terms. For these reasons, we may be better served waging a focused and increasingly efficient military campaign until an acceptable deal emerges. This may be less satisfying than a secret plan to win the war but it may be a more realistic and prudent response to the persistence of serious terrorist threats in South and Central Asia.