

Center for American Progress



Center for American Progress
Afghanistan Update Conference Call
December 1, 2009

Crystal, Operator: Good afternoon. My name is Crystal and I will be your conference operator today. At this time, I would like to welcome everyone to the Afghanistan Update Conference Call. All lines have been placed on mute to prevent any background noise. After the speakers' remarks, there will be a question and answer session. If you would like to ask a question during this time, simply press *1 on your telephone keypad. If you would like to withdraw your question, press the # key.

Thank you, Ms. Emmerling. You may begin your conference.

Suzi Emmerling: Hi, everyone, and thank you for joining us on this call today. My name is Suzi Emmerling. I'm on the communications team here. I'm going to give you my contact information in case you have any questions to follow up after the call. My phone numbers is 202-481-8224 and my email is semmerling@americanprogress.org.

Today we'll be discussing the statement that the Center for American Progress issued on Wednesday on the upcoming decision in Afghanistan by President Obama. We have on the line today our CAP experts: Brian Katulis, Lawrence Korb and Caroline Wadhams. To start, I'd like to turn it over to Caroline Wadhams.

Caroline Wadhams: I'm going to just quickly talk about the statement and then I'll turn it over to Larry and Brian. As everybody knows, President Obama is going to release his strategy tomorrow evening. We just wanted to, this past week, basically make a set of recommendations on what we think definitely needs to be included in that strategy.

We're seeing that most likely he's going to add about 30,000 more troops. He's going to expedite the training of security forces, of the Afghan security forces. He's going to probably expand the relationship with Pakistan. But we wanted to stress five key points that we believe Congress needs to demand from the president. Until they get a plan, a clear set of objectives and implementation strategy from Obama with a company matrix. I'm going to tell you about these five points that we think need to be included. Funding should not move forward until these elements are included in President Obama's strategy.

The five elements we think need to be included—and I'm sure you've seen them in the statement—are, one, President Obama needs to establish a flexible timeframe for the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

Two, the mission cannot just be a U.S. mission. It has to be an internal mission, that international flavor, the NATO lead must be part of any strategy moving forward.

Third, Pakistan must continue to be pressed to battle extremists within its borders. If we don't deal with the safe havens in Pakistan, more troops will not help the situation—nor will anything else for that matter.

Fourth, improving governance in Afghanistan and demanding internal reforms are essential for any successful strategy moving forward.

Fifth, Obama needs to present a plan for how this war is going to be funded.

I'm going to quickly talk about the internal nature of the mission that we think needs to be part of the strategy and the governance, and then I'm going to turn it over to Larry and Brian. It is clear that we cannot do the mission in Afghanistan alone, and we shouldn't have to. The security interests in Afghanistan don't just affect the United States, but they threaten the globe, and we should not be asked to bear the burden alone, especially in the midst of our own economic crisis and the demands we have around the world. We can't do it. We can't afford it, and we shouldn't have to.

In Afghanistan, more than 43 countries are contributing to the NATO mission. We have strong international partners, and we need to stress maintaining those relationships. The support for the Afghanistan mission is declining, not just in the United States but around the world. You have Canada saying that want to get out in 2011. Netherlands, 2010. Germany, the support for the mission is rapidly declining. Obama needs to make sure that he's constantly reaching out to our allies. That he's making steps to assuage their concerns, that there's consultation. The international nature of this mission is crucial.

On the governance piece, we've been talking about this incessantly in the media and elsewhere. But clearly, if you just send 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan and you don't address the governance problems, the issues with corruption, then it's not going to help. There are huge problems, as everyone knows, with corruption. Transparency International just ranked Afghanistan as the second most corrupt country in a perceptions poll. The majority of the Afghan people continue to see their government as predatory, corrupt, and they possess few levers in which to hold their officials accountable.

This corruption manifests itself in insidious ways. Public officials, police bribe Afghans for basic services. Personal property and land are seized

without cause. Public positions are sold and more. We bear, the international community bears some responsibility for this. We can't just blame I on Karzai; we have poured aid into Afghanistan without sufficient monitoring or accountability. We've continued to support the re-entrenchment of war lords, abusive war lords, into the system. And we need to make this a priority to root the corruption out.

Then finally as part of this, the justice issue is key. The Taliban has been incredibly effective at gaining support of Afghan communities by appealing to people's grievances over the lack of justice. The Taliban have set up mobile courts. They've served to mediate people's disputes. This absence has really hurt the international effort and needs to be prioritized.

I'm now going to turn it over to Brian, and then Larry will go from there. Thank you.

Brian Katulis:

Thanks, Caroline. This is Brian Katulis, Senior Fellow at the Center. Just one really quick point. First, I'm speaking to you from Europe so I think it's important to stress one of Caroline's points of President Obama's challenge. One of his main challenges is to appeal to our allies in Europe and I think you'll hear this in the speech tomorrow night. To do more, to contribute more, it's a point that NATO Secretary General Rasmussen has been making. And as I'm sitting here taking part in a confidence, it strikes me that this is going to be a major challenge.

But the main point I wanted to stress is the importance of Pakistan and having a much clearer focus on Pakistan. I'm not sure how much President Obama will talk about this in the speech tomorrow night. But it's key to the challenge as General McChrystal's report, his assessment from earlier this year, from August. Afghanistan's insurgency is clearly supported from Pakistan, quite clearly. We all know the about the Quetta Shura Taliban, the problems with the Harkani network, and Pakistan is one of the most complicated challenges that we face.

I was looking at the recent events. And over the past nine months essentially, there have been average one senior U.S. official traveling to Islamabad nearly every 10 days or two weeks. In the last month alone, we had the CIA director Leon Panetta, National Security Advisor Jim Jones, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. So this is an administration that understands the importance of Pakistan. There've been some press reports, I understand back in the States, about a possible expanded strategic partnership and a letter from President Obama to President Zardari.

When Larry and I returned from Pakistan with one of our colleagues, Colin Cookman earlier this year, one of the recommendations we made was to develop a much more structured, strategic framework agreement between the

US and Pakistan. Working this issue will be extremely important. It's very difficult for two reasons. One, the internal divisions between the Pakistanis. Normally, the divisions between the security establishment and the civilian leadership, but also the challenges of leadership and the disputes among the civilian leaders in Pakistan.

Second, Pakistan is a major challenge because our leverage, quick frankly, is not that strong. Earlier this year we tripled non-military assistance to Pakistan with the expectation that this carrot would be greeted and could be used to shape this relationship, and there was an uproar and complaints about conditions.

Another challenge with the development of assistance is that we simply haven't been able to deliver previous tranches of money. \$750 million dollars we approved in 2007 did not get to the people in FATA. So Pakistan is an enduring challenge. I'm not sure how publicly President Obama will speak about this, but I think he'll mention it. It's very much a work in progress, and I think we need to keep a focus on it. I'll turn it over to Larry now.

Lawrence Korb:

Thanks, Brian. Thanks, Caroline. Let me make a couple of comments on two of the things, about setting a timeline and paying for this. It's important, I think, to keep in mind a couple of things.

One, President Obama has already doubled the number of troops in Afghanistan. People think that this is his first attempt to deal with this situation. The fact of the matter, he's already doubled it. If he adds another 30 or so thousand troops, you're going to have about 100,000 Americans and 40 to 50,000 troops from other countries.

I think it's important to set a timeline. You can make it flexible, but you need to have goals for a couple of reasons. One, if we do not do that we're going to be seen, like the British and Soviets, as occupiers. The next is we need to give the Afghanistan security forces and the president and incentive to basically get their act together. What we think is a realistic goal is that within a year, Afghan forces should take the lead in particular areas of the country. Then within four years, they really ought to have the lead in all of the combat operations. Now this doesn't mean we're out completely, but it means that we get the majority of our combat forces out of the place. President Karzai himself has talked about five years, but I think we really need to make that a goal and stick to it unless the situation really changes dramatically.

The second is that right now the United States is spending close to \$4 billion dollars a month in Afghanistan. If you add these troops that people are talking about, you're going to get close to about \$6 trillion dollars. I think, personally—and we've written about this several times here—that it's been a

disgrace that we fought these two extended conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan without paying for them. I think it's time to stop that now.

This is the first extended conflict we've ever fought where we basically borrowed money. People forget that in Lyndon Johnson's last year in office, he actually balanced the federal budget and this was at the height of the war in Vietnam. I think if we do this, it would not only be fiscally sound but it would get the American people to realize that they have a stake in this. Now it doesn't necessarily mean you have to raise taxes.

You can do as Lyndon Johnson did during the war in Vietnam. There are a lot of programs in the baseline defense budget that you can go after, things like the Virginia Class submarine, the V-22 Osprey. No need to rush the joint strike fighter and the future combat system. So there are ways that you can get the money out of the baseline budget, but I think it's important, and I can't stress this too much, that we don't continue to accumulate more debt and borrow more money to deal with this situation.

I'll stop there and I guess it's time to turn it over to questions.

Suzi Emmerling: Crystal, please move to questions.

Crystal, Operator: At this time, I'd like to remind everyone that in order to ask a question, please press *1 on your touchtone phone. We will pause for a moment to compile the Q & A roster. Your first question comes from the line of Sue Fleming with Reuters.

Sue Fleming: You mentioned this figure of \$6 trillion dollars. Can you be a bit more specific on that and break that down a little bit? And the Afghans are talking of three to five years for having the security passed down to them. Do you think three years is a realistic sort of target?

Lawrence Korb: I didn't say trillion. I said billion dollars.

Sue Fleming: I thought you said trillion at one point, and I was thinking how does that work?

Lawrence Korb: If I did I—we've actually spent close to a trillion dollars on both wars, so I apology if I did say that. No, I think it is realistic. Don't forget we've been there for eight years—and yes, we haven't been doing what we should have. But we have been training the forces. I think it's important that we've increased the goal to get 134,000 or so Afghan Army people done by the end of this year, rather than waiting until 2014.

President Obama has already sent more trainers. I assume in this next package, he'll have more. So I think it is realistic. Again, it's important to

keep in mind what we're talking about here. It's hard to get the exact number of people in the Taliban, but you're talking maybe tops of about 20,000. So if you have American forces and as the Afghan forces begin to step up, I think it would be realistic to do it. That's why we said they should be in the lead within four years.

Sue Fleming: Thanks.

Crystal, Operator: Your next question comes from the line of Richard Fisk with New York Daily News.

Richard Fisk: Any estimates on how long it would take to get the troops deployed, however many the president decides upon tomorrow night? We're all hearing in the range of 30,000.

Also, Larry, in the sense of a time table, a drawdown. Do you see something happening where they might be able to point to—if not an actual drawdown, at least an end of a surge here, something that they could claim of an end-game in sight?

Lawrence Korb: On your first question, again, the problem is not just the troops—and you do have a problem because haven't started the drawdown in Iraq yet. The big drawdown's going to come after the election. The other is the facilities for them. From what I understand, if he goes 30,000 to 35,000, it's going to take a year to get all those troops over there.

Then of course on your second point, yes, as the Afghan forces begin to take control of whether—we put about in the west, for example, where we've got roughly 4,400 troops, that would enable us then to begin to take ours down. I think that's the way to do it. But your question is well done. It's very easy to say, "Well, we're going to send 30,000 more troops." You have to have facilities for them, you have to basically be able to provide support for them. So my guess is you'll see 9,000 to 10,000 Marines go right away, but the rest are going to take at least a year. The big influx will come next spring as we drawdown in Iraq.

Caroline Wadhams: Can I add one thing to that? This is Caroline Wadhams. It looks like from the leaks that Obama is going to try to do this in phase deployments and demand certain reforms as he deploys. Doing it in phases will give him leverage added leverage to demand reforms in other areas such as maybe the appointment of the Cabinet or some of the issues with corruption. Or potentially demanding Constitutional reform or whatever he decides to demand on the political side.

Crystal, Operator: Your next question comes from the line of Farah Stockman with The Boston Globe.

Farah Stockman: Hi. I don't know if Brian is still on the line. I was curious, when you're talking about an expanded strategic partnership with Pakistan, what does that look like? Given that they basically were supposed to be working on the border with Pakistan and then they withdrew from these outposts without even informing the Pakistanis. What are we talking about when we're talking about an expanded strategic partnership?

Brian Katulis: I'm still on here. How are you doing, Farah? What I think is in discussion is not just on coordinating on different tactics, but actually if you look at the Secretary's trip—I think you were on that—there have been discussions about a wide range of issues to move beyond this notion of Pakistan just being a transactional relationship. I think the formulation that I've heard in Pakistan is that we send them money and we tell them to do things, and to expand the relationship to the sorts of things that I think you saw in the SFA between the US and Iraq which has yet to be implemented.

But to have a much more expanded bilateral relationship on a wide ranges of issues and I think this is part of the strategy. Not just the mill-to-mill cooperation—which I think there's always room for improvement there as well as the intell. Also the notion of exchanges, energy cooperation I think is one component of it. I think the worry some people had when the Kerry-Lugar bill was passed was that sending more money without a much more structured bilateral relationship could actually not yield tangible results. Is that clear?

Farah Stockman: Sure. So exchanges, you mean exchanges of people, energy cooperation, water—that kind of thing?

Brian Katulis: Yeah. (Inaudible) to send the message, and I think this is one thing that the administration has talked about is calibrating its tone with the Pakistani leadership, and investing in a wider range of actors. Not having the Musharraf problem again, where we were seen to be almost wholly dependent on one or two leaders, but having a boarder contact with the Pakistani society, if you will. I think that was the attempt of Kerry-Lugar, but you saw the uproar and the reaction to that. I think these issues aren't solved overnight, but I think it can be worked if we continuously try to develop expanded contacts in Pakistan.

Farah Stockman: Can I just follow up quickly? Because it seems like one thing people are not talking about is the risks of destabilizing Pakistan, where we could definitely do that by adding more fuel to the fire that now we're seeing daily bombings there. It just seems like the society, there's only so much that society can take.

Brian Katulis: Absolutely. People are actually talking about that. Pakistanis are, and I think it'll be interesting to see the reaction. I'm going to be looking closely to see what the Pakistani reaction is to the Obama speech. Because they've expressed those concerns to us on our visits there with the Pakistani leadership, about the prospect of an Afghanistan surge pushing the insurgency deeper into Pakistan. That's a very delicate balancing act, but it goes back to the point of the need to work on both sides of the border in an integrated strategy. I think (inaudible) points there is this is one of the trickiest things, because it requires dealing with a multitude of different actors inside of Pakistan, many of whom have a different threat perception.

Caroline Wadhams: Just one thing, this is Caroline Wadhams. I think the point about destabilizing Pakistan is really important. I just wanted to add one thing to that. I think the insurgency has been very, very skilled at propoganda and I think they will inevitably use the announcement of an increase in troop levels to make the case, again and again, that this is a foreign occupation. That Karzai is a puppet and they will galvanize more people. I think the perceptions of this being the resentment towards the foreign occupier. I think that's increasing, and it's dangerous for their recruiting purposes. And that's why I think it's so important that we continue to talk about that we're not going to be there forever.

Of course, on the other side, people say well then Pakistan isn't going to agree to cooperate with us because they think we're about to leave. But the narrative that is being put forward by the insurgency is also very dangerous in the sense of that we want to occupy and rule them forever, and I think we have to be really careful about the messaging.

Farah Stockman: Thanks.

Crystal, Operator: Once again, to ask a question please press *1. Your next question comes from the line of Mitch Potter with Toronto Star.

Mitch Potter: Yes, thank you very much. A question for Caroline and the whole of the panel actually. Caroline, when you went through your list of countries observing declining support and timetables for withdraw. You did mention Canada, the Netherlands and you talked a little bit about Germany. I'd like to ask you if you can give an assessment of what the diplomatic prices is for the first country that might withdraw. Then sort of as an addendum to that, what would you say to the Canadian people. The article I'm writing is for a Canadian audience. What would you say to them after the very hard, long (inaudible) Canadian soldiers have had in Kandahar Province to try and shore them up and continue making this commitment?

Caroline Wadhams: Yes, it's very, very difficult. I think that one of the main things that needs to be done is that people around the world and in Canada, but everywhere and including the United States, they need to hear why it's important. I don't think leaders in the United States and elsewhere have made a compelling case about why we need to be there and why the stakes are so high that we remain in Afghanistan.

The al-Qaeda narrative that was used after 9/11 no longer works for current audiences. They need to understand what happens to regional stability if the international community walks away and what happens in terms of the humanitarian consequences. I think that case really needs to be made much more clearly.

But also, the Canadians have suffered tremendously and they have really taken on too much of the burden. Not compared to the United States, but compared to many other countries, that clearly to Canadian audience feels unfair and that's completely understandable. So I think other countries, the US just needs to continue to demand that other countries step forward. The UK has said they will give another 500 troops. Other countries have supposedly, according to the leaks, there may be an additional 6,000 troops that are provided to the mission.

I think if the Canadians and others hear that other people are putting forward more of a contribution, then it will make their staying there more tenable to them. But it's clearly very, very difficult.

Lawrence Korb: Mitch, let me tell you exactly what I told your government last year when I was up there. First of all, we need to apologize to the Canadians and the other Europeans who we told when we were told were coming in, we basically said all the combat was over and we just wanted you for reconstruction and development. That certainly was not true.

Second, we need to apology for the fact that we ignored it for so long. Two years ago, and when you were suffering a lot of casualties, we only had something like 16,000 Americans there because we were distracted by Iraq and had underestimated the difficulties.

I think the third thing is that it's not just going to be us that (inaudible). It's got to be the British. I think Gordon Brown has been terrific on this telling the Pakistanis basically, why haven't gotten Bin Laden? It's been eight years since he's been up there, and leaning on Karzai. Hopefully, I think those things will help.

Then finally, we are making a commitment. As I mentioned, Obama has already doubled the number of American troops there since he's come into office. If he does another 30,000 or so, that would mean he's tripled the number of troops. More importantly, even before this latest surge, he's tripled the number of combat battalions. People forget that. We've gone very high in combat battalions.

So I think all of those things. Then hopefully you can also get the new NATO Secretary General, who I think has also been terrific on this, to explain that

it's not for United States that you're doing it. It's for your own security and for the future of NATO.

Mitch Potter: Thank you. And just to touch on the other point I made, I suppose for all the international community, can you try and assess the diplomatic price that might be paid for any partners who just decide it's untenable and for domestic political reasons, they just need to leave despite everything?

Caroline Wadhams: Brian, Larry, anyone else have thoughts on that?

I don't know what the diplomatic price would be. The Bush Administration put a lot of pressure on our allies and it didn't work. Obama has to be much more—I think he has to take much more concrete steps in the way that he's appealing to these audiences. But I'm not sure that at this point it's going to do anyone any good to threaten with consequences if they withdraw. Somehow it has to be show to be in everybody's self-interest. I can't imagine that Obama will be threatening to cut off aid or to sanction countries, but I don't know.

Lawrence Korb: Again, remember there's going to be a new international conference in January. Hopefully then the international community can do it. But we can't—I think the Canadians have done fantastic, and I think on a per capita basis they've had more casualties I know of than us and just about any country.

Mitch Potter: Thank you very much.

Crystal, Operator: Your next question comes from the line of Paul Richter with the Los Angeles Times.

Paul Richter: Yes, I have two questions. First I'd like to ask Caroline on this issue of the phased deployment, is it really realistic to think that Obama would deny additional troops to the Afghan government if they failed to meet their governance benchmarks? It's hard for me to imagine that happening.

Secondly, I'd like to ask all members of the panel their thoughts about how Obama will tomorrow square this circle and offer an exit strategy that goes just far enough but not too far?

Caroline Wadhams: On the first question, on the phased deployment question, whether is realistic? I don't know. My sense is that if you don't start cleaning up the governance problems, then the troop levels are not going to help the situation. And I hope that Obama recognizes that if you pour more troops into protecting a government that continues to be perceived as predatory and abusive, then we are really in trouble.

So we'll have to see. Obama has talked a lot about the needs for governance reform, and they have talked about how—different officials have talked, implied that aid would not be forthcoming if these reforms don't take place. We will have to see whether that rhetoric will actually be taken seriously as we move forward. I hope that—around troops is where we actually have leverage, so we have to use, I think—and I hope the Obama administration thinks that we use the troop levels as leverage to demand—to actually focus on the sources of this insurgency related to corruption and justice, et cetera. I'll leave it at that.

Lawrence Korb: This is Larry. Paul, let me add a couple of things. Going back to the question that Rich Fisk asked me before, you're not going to be able to get all the troops right away because of the facilities that you need. So that does give him some leverage. In the final analysis, you're going to have to leave some time and if the government hasn't cleaned up its act, it's really doesn't matter if you don't have a government that's perceived as legitimate. The American people and their elected representatives are not going to allow their sons and daughters to continue to go and die and be wounded for a government that doesn't move in the right direction.

So I think he does have the leverage and I think that basically he will use it, because it's in our interest. If in fact Karzai perceives—as you know, he gave that one interview which he since retracted where he said, "You're just here for yourself, rather than for us." If he has that perception, we're in an awful lot of trouble. I do think he does, he will have that leverage.

Brian Katulis: Your second question was on the exit strategy?

Paul Richter: Yes.

Brian Katulis: How he can balance between lack of specifics and then sending a message? Did I understand it correctly?

Paul Richter: Yes, it seems like he's not going to want to be too specific. They already indicated he's not going to set out this kind of timeline that we have for Iran. So how does he convey to war-weary Americans that we are leaving, without going too far?

Brian Katulis: I think he's already offered some hints of what he might say. I think in some of the interviews he did when he returned or even when he was in Asia, he talked about not handing this off to his successor. I'm presuming he's presuming a two-term presidency, as I understand is their thinking in terms of timelines.

I think he'll give a notional timeline and talk about, perhaps, the middle of the next decade—and that's just a guess. I would be surprised that if President

Karzai's—where he outline a certain notional timeline. I would be surprised if that was not coordinated with what the White House is about to issue. I think the fact of the matter is that he understands that the clock is ticking, and in reality if they don't have a sense of progress or upward movement by next summer—and they've said this publicly from the administration—I think it just becomes just politically untenable and then also strategically unwise just to continue to stay on the same course there.

There's a very real clock ticking. He won't talk about this on the speech, but the real timeline, I think, (inaudible) trying to get at least a sense of a foot hold, some progress by next summer. Otherwise, I think you're looking at a very ugly political situation here at home.

(No further questions)

Suzi Emmerling: Thank you, everyone. I'd like to thank Dr. Korb, Mr. Katulis and Ms. Wadhams for enlightening us on Obama's upcoming decision on Afghanistan. Again, my contact information is 202-481-8224 or semmerling@americaprogress.org.

Also, we will post the full audio of this call on our website along with the statement. If you want to look on our home page, you should be able to find the audio within the next couple of hours. Thank you.

Crystal, Operator: This concludes today's conference call. You may now disconnect.

END OF AUDIO