



AMERICA'S WARS IN AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN, AND IRAQ:

THE CHALLENGE OF GRAND STRATEGY

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This is a difficult speech to give. I am going to talk about grand strategy in two very different wars, and do so at a time when both wars are extremely complex, are undergoing major changes at every level, and where we face serious uncertainties and risks. I also know from experience that speeches focusing on complexity, uncertainty, and risk are not popular, and can appear overly negative or pessimistic. We all want clear plans of action that produce decisive results on our watch. We want short-term frames of action, clear indicators of what we should do, and we to be reassured and increase our confidence in our success.

At the same time, it is all too easy to describe the resulting challenges in Afghanistan and Iraq in black and white terms, and make decisive policy recommendations. It is much harder to deal with fact that virtually every such challenge involves complex shades of gray, and that we will need to make key policy decisions in the face of levels of uncertainty that make any decision we take over the next few years more a "best guess" than a decision based on facts and probabilities.

The time is long overdue in which we need to look beyond the immediate course of the Iraq and Afghan Wars, and focus on how they meet our broader and longer term strategic needs. We needed to reassess their grand strategy, and let me begin by defining what I mean by this term:

- Grand strategy in existential wars is the ability to survive as efficiently as possible and at the lowest cost possible.
- Grand strategy in limited wars is fundamentally different. It is the ability to produce lasting benefits from a war that offset the war's costs and as efficiently as possible and at the lowest possible cost. Moreover, to a world power, it is to use military and civil resources in the way that produces the maximum benefit possible in terms of all national interests.

It is easy to forget these realities when we are actively at war, when we face critical day-to-day priorities, and everyone in the military and government has to put first things first. But, our experience in Vietnam illustrates the risks of this short-term thinking.

We need to remember that we actually seemed to have achieved Vietnam "More than Good Enough" at the point when US troops were withdrawn. We left with two Nobel prizes, and after a triumph of escalation and persistence. We left a Vietnam that appeared to be a kind of democracy, to be moving towards stable economy, and to have reasonable internal security. We transitioned to what seemed to be a large and effective ARVN. The only problem was that a few years later, we decisive lost in grand strategic terms.

We also need to remember that we had a consistent pattern of military success. We virtually defeated the Vietcong in the Tet Offensive, and we won almost every tactical encounter. The late Harry Summers notes in his writing that he made this point quite validly to a North Vietnamese officer several years after the collapse of South Vietnam.

He also notes, however, that the Vietnamese officer replied, "Yes, but this was irrelevant."

Moreover, economic and other forces now seem to have reversed that grand strategic defeat without another war. I saw this during a military tour of Vietnam that I took several years ago. It was not during the military phases of the tour. It was in learning that Vietnam had privatized its economy to the point where it had gone from a rice importer to a rice exporter in a little over two years. It was in having Vietnamese after Vietnamese talk about us as an ally in containing China.

It was in going to the sales counter in the secure waiting area in Hanoi airport and discovering the bottled water I bought was called "US Water" and the label said it was purified using a process developed by NASA, it was seeing US fighters for sale in the toy section and a financial daily for sale in English and Vietnamese.

If there is a lesson beyond the sheer level of uncertainty involved in shaping the grand strategic outcome of Vietnam, it is that we were right about the risk of a "domino theory." We just failed to realize that dominoes could fall in two directions.

From "Transformational War" to "Who Knows"

I don't mean to suggest that the grand strategic results of Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Iraq has to be the same as in Vietnam. It is clear, however, that our original grand strategic goals in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Iraq have already proved to be at least equally wrong. Put simply, we went into both wars stating that we were seeking:

- Transformational democracy: Creating examples that would reshape other local states, and create a powerful new force for regional stability.
- Major progress towards reaching our levels of governance, human rights, and rule of law.
- Rapid economic development.
- Creating conditions that allowed the rapid withdrawal of most of our forces, while focusing on host country policing and creating minimal national military forces with limited US financing and support.
- Creating model "coalitions of the willing" that would set the precedent for US leadership in the decades to come.

This set of grand strategic hopes lasted a little more than a year in each war. We now talk about our grand strategic goals in far more modest terms like Afghan and Iraq "good enough," and about creating fragile end states of reasonable stability and security, some movement towards development, and some elements of democracy. We do not talk at all

about transforming region. We all realize that both regions are now far less stable, that Iran and Pakistan are just two of the cases in point.

Yet it is unclear that we can achieve even this limited grand strategic result in Afghanistan or Iraq, and we have also brought Pakistan into the equation, making the Afghan War a struggle for the future of Pakistan as well. At this point in time, we cannot assign a high probability that our current wars will bring Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Iraq to a stable state of "good enough." After 7-9 years of war, we are still at the point of having to say, "Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq who knows?"

Rethinking the Issue of Grand Strategy

Let me make myself clear. I am not raising these issues because I feel we should not pursue military action with major uncertainties or high risks. War -- like all major human activity -- changes things in ways no one can predict or control. It means you have to make hard choices and accept the fact that many of your decisions will inevitably prove to be wrong over time.

I think it is clear to everyone in this audience that the US now faces decades of global challenges that will involve asymmetric and irregular conflicts where we will have to choose some form of involvement and cannot be certain of the outcome. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq are the kind of wars we will have to fight in the future when we talk about counterinsurgency in broken states, population-centric strategies, and armed nation building. Moreover, what has happened in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan is a reflection of the fact that the term "superpower" is often more misleading than useful in grand strategic terms. We face a world in which there are many radical changes we can at best influence but never control.

History provides countless warnings that you cannot control the grand strategic outcome of even the most decisive conflicts. We all have a natural tendency to deny these risks when it is *our* time and *our* war, but consider the wars of recent history.

World War I certainly did not achieve decisive grand strategic effects. World War II became a totally different Cold War in a matter of years. The break up of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact scarcely put an end to the problems in these areas. Korea is still a source of conflict after some 60 years.

No Arab-Israeli War has yet had a decisive, stable grand strategic result. The short-term outcome of a US defeat in Vietnam has been virtually reversed by the events that have followed. China is emerging as a peer competitor with little regard to the prior history of well over one hundred years of almost continuous internal and external conflict since the first Opium War began in 1839.

The Cost of Our Current Wars

What is critical from the viewpoint of grand strategy, however, is that even if we do become successful in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq by our current limited definitions of victory, we cannot be sure that we will have a lasting effect, or that we will end up with sustained, productive grand strategic results.

We have begun to talk about “transition” as if it were some kind of meaningful end state, and definition of “victory”. It clearly is not. “Transition” means leaving each country to cope with its own problems on its own terms. Given each nation’s deep internal problems and tensions, no one can be sure that five or ten years from now Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq will be strategic partners; or even that they will stay reasonably friendly, stable, and secure.

We need to become far more careful about the risks we take in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, and the future wars we engage in. And, we do need to constantly consider the direct and grand strategic costs of these wars and whether they are worth it even after we become involved in conflict.

There is no question that our current wars have been extraordinarily costly in time and opportunity cost, in money, and in blood, and that what started out as quick and surgical, limited commitments have become open-ended conflicts:

- We have now been in Afghanistan longer than the former Soviet Union. If one somewhat arbitrarily says that US participation in Vietnam lasted from 1962 to 1973, we are now committed to fighting longer in Afghanistan than we fought in Vietnam.
- Vietnam took 11 years, and staying in Afghanistan through FY2014 will be 13 years. If we are successful, senior US officials now talk about funding the bulk of Afghan military activity, with major training and equipment support through FY2023.
- We have been in Iraq for seven years and we are scheduled to withdraw all major combat forces at the end of eight and one-half years. We do, however, have an open ended commitment to a strategic partnership with a country that is still fighting a major counterinsurgency campaign, is far from stability and security, and is virtually without the military forces need to deal with external threats like Iran. US experts can only guess, but rebuilding Iraq forces to the point where Iraq can deter and defend against its neighbors will almost certainly require US aid through 2020.
- We have no consensus about what the dollar cost of our ongoing wars have been, or will be. The CRS is apolitical, however, and it has issued numbers that put the cost of our involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan at \$455 billion through FY2011. Given current spending trends, it seems likely that this war will cost at least another \$350 billion through FY2014. It seems reasonable to say we will spend some \$800 billion before this war is “over.”

- CRS estimates put the cost of the Iraq War at \$852 billion through FY2011, and current State Department and DoD plans indicate this cost will rise to some \$900 billion through FY2014. This puts the current cost of both wars at some \$1.3 trillion through FY2011 and \$1.7 trillion if we pursue them to some form of victory in the form of Afghan and Iraq “good enough.” This total compares with \$341 billion for the Korean War in constant FY2010 dollars and \$738 billion for Vietnam.
- There is another and more important cost. Again turning to CRS, the cost in blood of the Afghan War, to the US alone, is now over 1,300 dead and 9,700 wounded. The cost of the war in Iraq is over 4,400 dead, and a little under 32,000 wounded. Looking towards the future, it seems unlikely that we will have less than 1,900 killed and 40,000 wounded if we stay in Afghanistan through FY2014.

I should note that these figures are low by the standard of other recent wars. The figures for Korea were 36,574 killed and 103,2854 wounded. The figures for Vietnam were 58,220 killed and 153,303 wounded. The current casualties are far higher, however, when they are considered as a proportion of those who have actually served. The human burden on a professional force is very different from a force supported by the draft.

This list of costs shows all too clearly how easy it is to talk about grand strategy in abstract terms, or focus narrowly on the current tactical and strategic task. We cannot afford to focus on our current conflicts and forget the other ways in which we might have used the time, money, and blood. These are all assets we could have used somewhere else to achieve other US strategic or domestic interests.

The Lessons of 2001-2010

At the same time, these costs were anything but inevitable. We would never have faced either these costs or the grand strategic risks we now face in each war *if* we had done a more realistic job of planning and executing these conflicts in tactical, strategic, and grand strategic terms.

We need to do a far more frank and honest job of considering the lessons of 2001 to 2010, and the grand strategic mistakes that helped lead us to where we are today. If we are to fight limited wars for limited objectives without having to use most of our deployable forces and make massive expenditures, we need to constantly ask is this right allocation of assets? Does this produce the best overall, enduring, and global grand strategic outcome?

All of us have our own views of what has happened since 2001. Speaking personally, if I had to judge each war today, I would probably conclude that the Iraq War has been too costly to the Iraqis and to us, and the grand strategic future is too uncertain. Containment offered at least the same probability of limiting Iraq as a threat, and the internal tension in

Iraq would probably have changed the regime. The cost in negative regional and global perceptions of the US would have been far lower, and we could have still achieved our grand strategic goals in the Gulf and Middle East.

I would conclude that our involvement in Afghanistan was far less optional, but the outcome in Afghanistan and Pakistan is at least as uncertain.

But, neither war should have been fought in the way we fought it. We were brilliant warfighters in the early stages of both wars, but we were unprepared for grand strategy and every critical aspect of what followed initial success.

That lack of preparation and grand strategic realism is all too clear today. We went into both wars with minimal military capabilities for counterinsurgency, and with almost no civil capability to deal with the problems of governance and development. We since have had to rewrite virtually every aspect of our doctrine and field manuals on counterinsurgency and stability operations. We have had to rethink every aspect of civil-military operations, and we are still making efforts to organize the civil branches of government – particularly the State Department and USAID – to create the ability to support the civil side of “clear, build, hold, and transition.”

What is even more important, however, is that we went into each war with a grand strategy that was a "triumph of hope over experience:"

- We failed to look beyond the impact of our initial tactical operations and short-term strategic goal with any realism. We had no workable plans or resources for the post conflict period, and to provide a meaningful level of stability operation.
- The military side of our grand strategy – to the extent we had one – consisted of the assumption that if we defeated the immediate enemy, the consequences would take care of themselves. The civil side consisted of a blind faith in the transformational impact of creating democratic central governments.
- We failed to plan for the possibility of instability and insurgency, and assess the real world divisions and risks in each society. We failed to see the problems in nation building. We mirrored imaged our objectives for their future as if they were theirs. We assumed democracy was easy, and forgot that the quality of governance is far more important to most people than politics.
- We created coalitions of our allies largely for the purposes of political symbolism and to shift the burden. We assumed that both we and they would be little peacekeepers, and we did not think out the risks if we both became involved in an enduring stability operations or war.
- We now know the cost of these failures. We know the cost of trying to improvise after the fact, and of denying the seriousness of the rise of insurgency in both Iraq

and Afghanistan over time. We know the cost of not coming firmly to grips with Pakistan while Al Qaida and the Taliban were weak.

- Moreover, our mistakes went far beyond the planning and execution of the initial phases of war. We lacked the experience, human resources, and realism to deal with the threat in either war effectively as it emerged.
- We badly underresourced our military efforts in both wars when the threat was still minimal, and we delayed meaningful efforts to create strong Iraqi and Afghan forces for years as the need for such forces was clear. At the same time, we put massive aid resources into mid and long term programs that Afghanistan and Iraq could not absorb, that we could not manage or implement, and that did not produce major benefits in terms of warfighting or near-term stability. Finally, we made a critical set of trade-offs that gave priority to Iraq over Afghanistan without explicitly analyzing the risks.
- We never came to grips with the growing problems Pakistan faced. From roughly 2001 to mid-2009, we failed to exert the proper level of pressure on Pakistan to act, rather than make ambiguous commitments. More than that, however, we failed to provide meaningful incentives. We let our rhetoric about partnership become our own reality for years after it was clear that Pakistan saw the situation through very different eyes.
- We did not really resource the military dimension of the Iraq War until early 2007, and we never had enough civilians in place – or the right civil programs – to make the most effective use of our aid resources in Iraq. The work of the Special Inspector General for Iraq (SIGIR) provides a long, exact record of these grand strategic failures.
- Furthermore, we not only made the same mistakes in Afghanistan, we denied the cost of putting Iraq first. We stayed in a state of near denial as the threat built up in Afghanistan, lacked a coherent strategy until the spring of 2009, only then began a troop build-up we just completed in October, and still are critically short of civilian partners.

We are not a superpower in economic terms. Even with a full economic recovery, we face a quarter of a century in which the size of our economy and steadily growing entitlement expenditures will limit our freedom of action. Regardless of what our national strategies say, we also face a future in which an all-professional force can really fight only one major, prolonged regional contingency at a time, and we still have no clear plans for providing enough or the right civilian partners for the kind of conflicts we are now fighting.

The Grand Strategic Situation in Iraq

We cannot reinvent the past. We are involved in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq; and we have to live with the grand strategic consequences of what we have done and where we now are. The most we can do about the past at this point is to remember these lessons in dealing with every major contingency that involves power projection in the future. Our choices now are how do we deal with the future, and best reduce uncertainty and seek a favorable outcome.

Our choices are easiest in the case of Iraq. The grand strategic priorities are clear, the future costs of the options we still have are far smaller, and we have no real choice about staying in the Gulf. The Department of Energy's projections show we will be as directly dependent on energy imports through 2035 as we are today. They also show the Gulf will steadily expand its share of global oil production, and Iraq will be an increasingly critical part of that production.

Our grand strategy must be based on the fact that the security of the Gulf region will remain a critical US strategic interest in terms of world oil prices, and stability and health of an increasingly global economy, and the ability of the states that produce our key imports to keep producing them. That strategy does not depend upon grand strategic success in Iraq but it is all too clear that Iraq is a key regional power, with critical strategic geography. A weak Iraq, or one tied to Iran, will pose a constant threat to the stability of the Gulf, key allies like Israel and Jordan, and the entire region.

Key elements of our grand strategic posture and goals in the region will be roughly the same regardless of what happens in Iraq. US grand strategy must be shaped around the fact that the US will need to maintain strong forces and deployment capabilities in the Gulf, work with its allies in the southern Gulf to build up their capabilities, do what it can to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons, and be ready to contain Iran and other threats to Gulf exports.

We cannot control the future. As the events since the Iraq election have made all too clear, the political structure of Iraq – and every aspect of its stability and security -- is now up to the Iraqis. Our options depend on decisions by the new Iraqi government and Iraq's desire and ability to implement a strategic partnership with the US. We can use our influence to try to create a stable and inclusive government and heal Iraq's sectarian and ethnic divisions, but we have spent the last six months seeing the growing limits to that influence.

While we cannot be certain Iraq will want a strategic partnership with the US, or that it will have a national and effective government and security forces, this seems more probable than a sudden rejection of our existing agreements. We have to be prepared for a bad or worst case, but we can scarcely afford to abandon Iraq, and we need a strong strategic partnership with Iraq *if* we can create one.

Our efforts to create a favorable grand strategic outcome in Iraq do have to take account of the fact it will take a decade to create anything like the oil wealth Iraq needs to reach its past level of development and move forward. It is years away from defeating the

various extremist factions that threaten it. The US must be ready to provide at least a limited flow of critical military aid, and continuing US civil aid and advisory support indefinitely into the future.

In Iraq's case, however, we are already in transition. We have already largely determined our options in Iraq in the form of detailed plans to withdraw our forces and most of our PRTs by the end of 2011, and in our current requests to Congress to fund future advisory presence and aid effort.

We have done what we can to shape the basic structure Iraqi security forces. We now have to do what we can work with Iraqis on their terms to make these forces effective in ending Iraq's internal violence and in creating an effective national defense capability. This means providing as strong a mix of Department of Defense and State Department military and police training efforts and teams as Iraq will allow, and provide at least some aid in military procurement until Iraq's oil exports increase to the point where it can fully fund both its urgent security and civil needs. It means building an Iraqi capability for national defense as well as counterinsurgency. If we want a secure Iraq in the interim, it also means we must shape a strong enough US presence in the Gulf after we leave Iraq to ensure Iraq is deterred and be ready to defend Iraq until it is ready to defend itself.

We must do what we can on the civil side as well. The State Department already plans to create a strong embassy, two consulates, and two diplomatic presences in Iraq. We either make these plans work in broad terms or we will fail. The same is true of our plans to transition from major flows of US grant aid to a largely advisory presence. The Congress will not fund another major new aid program without a massive crisis, and Iraq is scarcely prepared to have the US try to reinvent a plan for a US diplomatic presence.

We cannot ignore Iraq, and we cannot let neglect or a false sense of economy cripple these efforts if Iraq can be persuaded to pursue a meaningful strategic partnership. Containing Iraq, dealing with a weak or divided Iraq, and coping with add Iranian influence are all options we may be forced to live with but they are not options we should choose. We have at least a half-decade of stability and security efforts to make if we want to increase the probability that there is a grand strategic outcome of the kind we need. This Administration and this Congress must understand that, and our force plans and commitments, and our military and civil aid budgets must be shaped accordingly.

The Grand Strategic Situation in the Afghan, and Pakistan Wars

We may still be able to make choices that give us a form of grand strategic victory in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and both countries may still emerge as reasonably stable and secure states that do not become major centers or sanctuaries for extremism and terrorism on an international level. The fact remains, however, that the military and political uncertainties are far greater in Afghanistan and Pakistan than in Iraq. If Iraq presents the grand strategic problems of building on military success, Afghanistan still presents the problem of having to continue to fight a war in ways that compensate for years of neglect, denial, and underresourcing.

We now have to live with the consequences of eight years of failing to resource these wars, and of failing to deal with the emerging threats on the ground with anything like the resources and effective civil-military effort required.

There were good reasons why General McChrystal asked those of us who were in his advisory group in 2009 to focus on two critical questions: What is the mission and can it be accomplished. To the extent that there were “ops plans” and anything like a grand strategy for the Afghan war in the spring of 2009, they still tended to treat Afghanistan in transformational terms: the goal was still a secure, modern democratic state operating according to Western standards of a rule of law and human rights and on its way to development according to the standard set in the Afghan compact and development plan. After eight years of war, the US, ISAF, and UNAMA had also produced little more than open-ended, vague conceptual plans of how to achieve these goals.

The military plans did not provide a credible basis for either bringing enough force to bear to be effective, or creating strong and effective Afghan forces. As Major General Flynn later made clear, these plans were not supported by meaningful intelligence assessments. They focused far too much on the military aspects of the threat, and far too little on the growth of Taliban control and influence. They understated or ignored the threat posed by Afghan corruption, power brokers and internal divisions, and the loss of popular support.

US, allied, and UN civil aid plans lacked credible estimates of time and resource requirements, measures of effectiveness, and anything approaching an integrated civil-military and international effort. Moreover, we were only beginning to understand the risk that Pakistan might become a far more critical strategic problem than Afghanistan.

Since that time, the US and its allies have accomplished a great deal. We have redefined our goals for an end state from a transformational ideal to one that may actually be achievable; a goal where “transition” means that Afghanistan can maintain a reasonable level of stability and security, limit insurgent activity and present use of Afghan territory by international terrorist elements as a major base. We have put more pressure on Pakistan, and we have offered meaningful incentives for it to act, with some positive – if limited -- results.

We seem to have stopped the past process of inventing new concepts every year, without defining how to implement and resource them. We are now embarked on far more consistent effort to implement a tangible strategy that is defined and executed in terms of specific actions, resources, time, and measures of effectiveness.

That effort already has had tangible results. The US completed its deployment of additional troops in October, and ISAF and Afghan forces are now involved in major military operations to secure populated areas in the South and East. More Afghan forces are doing more in the field, and a far stronger ISAF effort is being made at partnering. The US and ISAF are finally beginning to actually implement hold and build tactics to

keep the population cluster secure, and we have greatly improved our ability to attack insurgent networks at almost every level.

The training base for Afghan forces is now fully funded and largely equipped, and the shortfall in trainers has been reduced – although scarcely eliminated, given the fact we are short some 40-60% of our requirement for 2011, depending on whether we count pledges or not. The number of civilians in the field has improved civil-military coordination, and we are now at least talking about meaningful integrated civil-military plans and measures of effectiveness.

That said, all of the challenges, risks, and “negatives” the US and ISAF faced in shaping the new strategy in 2009 still exist, and some have actually become more threatening. These challenges divide into two broad groups.

Negatives Where the US and ISAF have Primary Impact

The first set of challenges involve areas where we have primary influence and control, and where we will learn whether continuing to implement our new strategy will allow us to cope with these negatives over the coming 6 to 12 months. The areas where US and ISAF action, and implementing the new strategy, will have primary impact are:

- *It is still unclear that we can scale up our limited initial successes to cover the country and sustain them over time, or that talk of transition to Afghan forces and governance will be more than an exercise in political symbolism.* Our successes in RC East, RC South, and RC Southwest are still patchy and uncertain. They are not yet proof our strategy works on any reasonable scale, but are rather proof that if we deploy major resources against a comparatively weak enemy, we will score some initial gains as long as those superior resources give us a major tactical advantage. Gains like those in Nawa are still isolated examples of the impact of superior resources we cannot scale up on a national level. It will be mid to late 2011 before we can begin to show we can scale up our current successes to the level we need, and years before it is clear that the Afghan government and forces can show they can accept a real transition and sustain it.
- *The Taliban and Al Qaida have proved resilient and adaptive, and their ability to recover and sustain their operations is still at issue.* We still have to learn just how well the Taliban and other insurgents can sustain their operations in the future, and it is not yet clear how well it can disperse, use stay behinds, or continue to fight in “cleared” areas. ISAF estimates show that ISAF gains in some areas are still being offset by Taliban gains in other areas. Taliban momentum may have been halted, but it has scarcely been decisively reversed. We need to learn what the new strategy can accomplish to achieve this on a level where we can achieve sustained results on a national basis. We also need to learn how well an Afghancentric “clear, hold, transition, and build effort” can cope with the future of the mix of Al Qaida, Taliban, and other major insurgent groups in

Pakistan. These are struggles our strategy cannot directly control, and where Pakistan's capability and commitment remains unproven.

- *Allied withdrawals and uncertain pledges create serious problems, as do allied caveats, the national branding of allied aid efforts, and the emphasis some allies put on political settlement regardless of the costs and risk.* We need to build a more solid and realistic structure of operations within the ISAF alliance. Our current alliance structure in Afghanistan is divided and uncertain. Some key countries like Britain, Australia, Denmark, Poland, are fully in the fight and have made it clear they will stay. Others like Canada and the Netherlands are removing combat forces, and still others have never been fully the fight. Aid efforts are even more subject to national branding and caveats than military efforts. Rhetoric like the Lisbon conference cannot hide the fact that the alliance is weakening, rather than strengthening, and remains divided in ways that limit its effectiveness.
- *Afghan force development remains uncertain.* Progress in numbers still disguises problems in quality. The Afghan Army is making serious progress, but it is unclear that it can sustain the current pace of combat and create a stable base for transition. The creation of a balanced force with the skilled elements needed for lasting transition is still to come. The Afghan police remain a major problem in terms of corruption and effectiveness, and the best element – the ANCO, is still about 25% of the need force and still suffers serious from attrition. The creation of a local police force may ease these problems but is still experimental. More broadly, there is a serious mismatch between the build up of the police and the creation of effective elements of governance in the field, and finding the right mix of formal and traditional legal systems to replace the Taliban is still problematic.
- *The ability to achieve the civil side of clear, hold, build, and transition – and the necessary progress in civil governance and development aid efforts -- remains problematic.* The Afghan structure of governance, and critical problems in economic opportunity and the distribution of wealth, still present critical problems. At one level, the Afghan government has critical weaknesses at the local, district, provincial, and national level. At another, so does the outside aid effort. UNAMA still has not demonstrated the ability to assess aid efforts or produce any effective coordination. Mid and long term aid is still largely decoupled from the war and Afghan needs. We are still struggling to create a coordinated civil-military short-term aid effort that can make “hold, build, and transition” real. National branding, short tours of duty, a lack of validated requirements and projects, and a lack of meaningful measures of effectiveness remain critical problems that we have to show we can solve.

I personally believe we can deal with these problems now that we have set a more realistic “aspirational” deadline of 2014, but I am vested in our new strategy and no one is immune to putting hope before experience. No one can yet be sure whether we can demonstrate that we can succeed in dealing with all of these problems by the end of next year, and no one can be certain that we will fully succeed in dealing with them at the

national scale we need to succeed by some point in our "aspirational" deadline of 2014, if ever.

Negatives Where Afghanistan and Pakistan have Primary Impact

My major concern is with the second set of challenges: The ones shaped largely by the internal dynamics of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unfortunately, these challenges are even greater than those in Iraq, and they pose great grand strategic risks in achieving lasting results – even if we succeed in fully meeting every previous challenge. Even if we succeed in every area where we have direct influence and control, we can still lose the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or both countries in grand strategic terms before we even get to the transition phase, or lose it in the years that follow.

We face critical internal problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and each passing month still provides another example of the limits to what we can do:

- *The weakness and lack of popular support of the Afghan government remains as much of a threat as the Taliban.* The US and ISAF have made progress in creating more effective governance at the local level, and in supporting the more honest and effective Afghan officials at every level. President Karzai, however, remains a problematic leader, caught up in uncertain support for the new strategy, uncertainty over how far he will go in compromising with the Taliban, election and corruption scandals, and deep tensions with the US and ISAF. Karzai, however, is only the symbol of problems in governance at every level, and it is far from clear that US and other aid efforts can create an effective Afghan capability to govern and transition.
- *Corruption and waste remain potential war losers.* The combination of poorly controlled US and allied contracting and aid spending on the one hand, and Afghan corruption on the other, steadily reduce popular Afghan support for the war. Some 9 ½ years into the fighting, even the US has not shown it can control the flood of money that has done so much to raise Afghan corruption to unmanageable levels. Efforts are now being made to deal with the fact that the US, our allies, the UN, and ISAF have pursued policies that have done much to raise the level of corruption and power brokering to a war losing level, but major reform has not yet been implemented.
- *Underlying problems in the economy, major Afghan demographic pressures, displaced populations, and ethnic and sectarian tensions remain critical factors affecting short-term security and long term stability.* Progress in macroeconomics like increases in the total GDP, and talk about vast potential mineral resources, disguise the fact that the bulk of the population is poor (per capita income ranks 217th in the world), income is badly distributed, and meaningful employment is often lacking.

- *Many areas of economic activity still face critical security problems, and a substantial part of the population need UN and other outside food aid to survive.* The UN World Food program fed some 9 million out of 29 million Afghans in 2009 (31%), and the latest WFP survey found that 7.4 million people – nearly a third of the population – are unable to get enough food to live active, healthy lives. Another 8.5 million people, or 37 percent, are on the borderline of food insecurity. This puts some 70% of the population at risk. Around 400,000 people each year are seriously affected by natural disasters, such as droughts, floods, earthquakes or extreme weather conditions.

These problems are compounded by an infrastructure crisis. In spite of “feel good” factoids, education, health, roads, power, water, and agriculture all present critical problems in various parts of the country. These problems seriously undermine the ability to create sustained “hold and build” areas as well as eventual transition.

- *Afghan fears and “war fatigue,” allied war fatigue, and tensions between the US and Afghan government create growing pressure for some form of political settlement that may not bring security or stability.* The US, the UK, and a number of other allied governments have done much to ease Afghan and Pakistani fears that the US and other ISAF countries might abandon the war in the near term. The new US focus on 2014 is a critical step forward in committing the US to the kind of strategic patience that is essential to winning the war. The fact remains, however, that polls show growing support for a settlement with the Taliban. The position of key Afghan leaders is unclear and they may choose a settlement that gives the Taliban too many advantages or is a façade for defeat. Pakistan plays an uncertain and self-seeking role. A number of allied governments seem to favor a political settlement even if this involves a very high level of risk.
- *Pakistan’s role in the war remains uncertain and its internal instability is growing.* The limited progress Pakistani forces have made has not yet affected key elements of the Afghan insurgents or directly threatened Al Qaida in Pakistan. The role the ISI is playing still seems to involve ties to the Taliban, and the floods have severely affected Pakistani military capabilities. Internal political instability has reached critical levels with no clear civil leader to take firm control of the situation. Corruption and power brokering are as critical problems in Pakistan as in Afghanistan.

Grand Strategic Realism in Dealing With Afghanistan and Pakistan

These problems do not mean the new strategy will fail, or that the US and its allies should not continue to try to shape a successful grand strategic outcome of the war. But, it is important to remember that the grand strategic stakes in Afghanistan and Pakistan are different from those in the Gulf, and that the risk we will fail for reasons beyond our control are far higher. We need to constantly preserve options if it becomes clear we cannot succeed, or that the Afghan and Pakistani governments will not allow us to

succeed. Withdrawal has to be a constant option, and we need to reassess our overall posture in Central Asia in the process.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are US strategic interests, but they are not *vital* US strategic interests, and we must make it quietly clear to both the Afghan and Pakistani governments that we know this and we have real options. We need to dial back the hype that is the almost inevitable result of our commitment to winning a given war. We need to be more realistic about the full range of our strategic interests, the challenges we face, and the constraints on our resources.

The world is filled with weak and failed states in crisis. This does not make them a universal set of strategic priorities. Moreover, Afghanistan has negligible strategic importance for the US, except for the fact that a defeat now would send a major negative message throughout the world, and might lead to a *unique* strategic base for Al Qaida or other violent extremist and terrorist groups.

Pakistan is a more serious regional problem, but it is not necessarily our problem. The Cold War is long over. We have had nearly a decade in which to learn we have no magic solution to the India-Pakistan conflict, and strategic competition with China is a vital national interest that makes India more of a strategic priority.

Pakistani stability and security, and creating a friendlier Pakistan, would serve US strategic interests. But, the grand strategic reasons for the US to be deeply involved in military operations and massive aid efforts in Pakistan are still relatively limited. US involvement in Pakistan must be shaped by the cost and probability of such efforts in achieving well-defined goals. The fact that Pakistan is a nuclear state is a risk to the US more because of the possible transfer of weapons to terrorists or states in other regions than anything that happens in South Asia, and that risk (and our ability to limit it) must not be exaggerated.

The threat Afghanistan and Pakistan pose in terms of terrorism also has to be kept in proportion. "We're here because we're here because we're here" is not a grand strategy. It is not a reason to focus so many resources on two countries. The problem of extremist sanctuaries is not limited to one area or country and extends from Morocco to the Philippines, North into the "stans" in Central Asia, and south into Yemen, Somalia, and West Africa. We need to be far more objective in asking ourselves whether limited wars against terrorist movements can actually defeat them, or simply make terrorism mutate and relocate.

Every aspect of our grand strategy needs to be constantly recalibrated around the fact that both countries involve real US strategic interests, but neither country involves *vital* enough US strategic interests to justify fighting wars their governments do not support enough to win, or ignoring the fact that there is only a limited probability that the future regimes in Afghanistan and Pakistan will do enough to serve our interests for us to try to serve theirs.

We need to make the key test of our relations the probability that both states will be lasting grand strategic assets – something that depends critically on their actions, rather than ours. If we face critical problems in dealing with the government and politics of either state, we must be prepared to leave quickly and decisively.

The grand strategic value of both states is determined largely by how willing they are to work with us as strategic partners, and they are both countries where we can choose containment and/or strategic neglect as alternatives. We need to recognize this in our contingency planning, and we need to make it clear to both states that there are critical *quid pro quos* for our staying. This is a decision we need to reevaluate on at least an annual basis, and where the governments must understand our needs just as much as we understand theirs.

Reassessing Our Grand Strategic Posture in Central Asia

These same issues illustrate why we need to evaluate our grand strategic commitment to Afghanistan and Pakistan in a way that makes hard choices about our future posture in Central Asia. We need to debate exactly what US goals are in all of Central Asia, and what overall level of continued US effort is really justified.

A look at the map and the region's infrastructure also makes it clear that Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia are natural Russian and Chinese spheres of influence in political, military, economic, and energy terms. If we limit our role to conventional diplomacy and military advisory roles, Russia and China will have to do what they can to bring stability and security to the region. Iran and India, and other peripheral powers will have to play a far greater role.

“Strategic neglect” is not an American strength, and neither is “strategic triage.” We cannot afford grand strategies, however, that ignore the need to make far harder choices on a global level. If the costs and risks of a major US commitment in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia remain this high, or continue to grow, this is one “Great Game” that can best be won by refusing to play it. There are simply too many complex ethnic, sectarian, tribal, and other national tensions in this region for a US to manage the end result. We have too many other interests in Asia, Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East where we already have vital strategic interests, and face problems that challenge our capabilities and resources.

Avoiding Limited Wars That Commit the Bulk of US Ground Forces and US Civil-Military Resources to Open-Ended Armed Nation Building

More broadly, we need to consider what a near decade of conflict should show about the way we risk making major long-term commitment of scarce US military forces and civil aid capabilities in the future, and about the need to find better ways to use our resources. It shows that we have to be far more careful about letting limited involvement escalate into “worst case wars” in one narrow part of the world.

We may not like to face the fact that we are actively involved in armed nation building, and that this can be a “worst case” form of limited war. The fact is, however, that we did escalate to this level in Iraq, we are still fighting on this level in Afghanistan, and we have a growing involvement in Pakistan.

They have tied up an immense proportion of the US defense budget, US forces, and scarce aid and development expertise in extremely high-risk commitments to a given conflict whose scale and duration cannot be predicted and run a constant risk of serious escalation and/or failure. Moreover, it is more than doubtful that the US would have escalated or engaged in any of its these wars in the way it did if their costs and risks had been properly assessed before or during the initial phase of military and stability operations.

Such wars may become necessary in the future, but we need to consider the cost-benefits of this approach to making strategic commitments even when we have valid grand strategic needs, and the cost-benefits of alternative approaches. The US needs to do a far better job of considering alternative strategies and grand strategies that put far more emphasis on containment and deterrence; on reacting decisively before wars escalate to this level of requirements, and building on allies at moderate cost rather than fighting and spending in broken states.

In the process, the US also needs to be far more realistic about its severe real-world limits as a military “superpower.” The Iraq and Afghan/Pakistan wars have shown that the US now effectively has the land forces for one major regional contingency and no practical prospect of increasing them. These are the same forces that would have to help South Korea in a crisis or any other partner that required US support in a conventional war.

Emphasizing Containment and Building Up Regional Friends and Allies

We do have important options. Again going back to the CRS estimates and current spending trends, the best case outcome of US intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is almost certain to cost at least \$1.5 trillion, and may well cost \$2 trillion – and will not produce a stable end state or grand strategic outcome in any of the three cases.

These costs raise serious questions about what the US could have accomplished by using a fraction of the money to build up other regional allies, cultivate more international cooperation in counterterrorism, and develop more advanced power projection capabilities. They also raise serious questions about working with states *before* they are crippled by internal tensions, doing far more to build up host country forces, on a preventive or preemptive level, and creating carefully focused US military capabilities like airpower and UCAVs, Special Forces, trainers and mentors, and intelligence assets.

The answers to these questions are far from clear, but blundering into open-ended “limited” wars for the wrong reasons, and/or based on fundamentally wrong perceptions of the risks and situation is not an experience we should repeat.

Forcing Realism on Efforts to Improve Democracy, Governance, Human Rights, the Rule of Law, and Economic Development

The US needs to be far more realistic about what it can and cannot achieve in terms of developing effective democracy and governance, human rights and the rule of law, and economic development.

There is an unfortunate surrealism that binds area experts, neoconservatives, and liberals into the same unrealistic expectations as to how easily societies and nations can be transformed – although all would dispute the other's stated goals and rationale. The official reporting of US government including the Inspector General of the Department of Defense, GAO, SIGIR and SIGAR all provide grim warnings as to just how unready the civil side of US grand strategy still is in making meaningful estimates of requirements, effective plans, and executing successful programs.

Basing Grand Strategy on Integrated Civil-Military Operations

Limiting the level of US commitment to any one conflict does not mean the Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq Wars are not arguments against integrated civil-military operations. Quite to the contrary, they show both that there is no military answer to many of the problems the US faces, and that there are many cases where civil efforts and “soft power” cannot be a meaningful substitute for military power.

Each wars does show, however, that US needs to develop both far better civil capacity if it is to create an effective civil component and partner for even far more limited problem countries and actual conflicts. It needs to find more effective ways of creating truly integrated civil-military plans, and ones that are based on realistic resources and expectations. At present, the US has developed the facade of such efforts, but is still far from developing the capacity, the organization, and capability to give them the proper level of substance and clearly measurable effectiveness.

If the US is to develop an effective grand strategy for its future wars, and for the regions where it is now fighting, it must do so in the form of more adequate, detailed and integrated civil-military plans. This is true even when the main focus is “conventional” diplomacy and civil and military advisory efforts. This will be absolutely critical if the US is becomes involved in even more limited forms of armed nation building in the future. In the process, we need to act on the reality that a conceptual plan is not a workable strategy at any level – tactical to grand. Neither is the pursuit of an impossible end-state.

After what soon will be ten years of fighting, it is time we not only learned all of these lessons, but based every aspect of our grand strategy upon them.