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Statement

Öffentliche Anhörung

zum Thema

**„Ausweitung, Eskalation und Transition 2009 bis 2014:
Die Ausweitung des deutschen Engagements im Kontext
von Strategiewechsel und verschärfter Sicherheitslage“**

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President Barack Obama recognized the deteriorating situation behind the public happy talk about Afghanistan. He promised to end the war in Iraq and focus on Afghanistan. The first draft of his administration's policy on Afghanistan was a March 2009 report written by Bruce Riedel, a retired CIA counter-terrorism analyst and National Security Council official working at the Brookings Institution.

The policy review that followed in the fall of 2009 was largely based on an assessment of the situation on the ground by the newly appointed commander, Lt. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal. Riedel's report called for a "fully resourced counter-insurgency" to produce "a self-reliant Afghanistan that will enable a withdrawal of combat forces while sustaining our commitment to political and economic development."

That sentence in the introduction, however, was the last — and only — reference to self-reliance in the report. The Riedel report pretended to have a plan to strengthen local government in Afghanistan — "increasing civilian capacity" by bringing to bear American and other international "expertise," as if the problems of the Afghan state resulted from a lack of training by Americans — but it did not even pretend to have a plan to make Afghanistan self-reliant. It seemed to assume that organizations built with foreign aid on foreign models would function just like institutions that countries designed and financed themselves.

McChrystal doubled down on the counter-insurgency Ponzi scheme. Classic counter-insurgency consisted of three stages: clear (out the enemy), hold (the cleared territory with military force), and then build (the civilian institutions of governance that would substitute for the military). This model was derived from cases either of states fighting a domestic insurgency (India, Colombia) or colonial powers facing revolts (France in Algeria, the United Kingdom in Malaya). In all such cases, the state that commanded the military force that cleared and held was the same state that would build the new institutions.

As the United States in Afghanistan was neither the national government nor, ostensibly, a colonial power that intended to occupy the country forever, the designers of U.S. counter-insurgency theory added a fourth stage: transfer (to the control of the national government). To do that, McChrystal wrote, the United States had to "prioritize responsive and accountable governance."

On Sept. 30, 2009, when I saw that meaningless phrase in an advance copy of the report that Richard Holbrooke shared with me in his office, I thought it was a plan to blame the civilians when it failed. The U.S. government, military or civilian, had no idea how to build and transfer institutions that would work in rural Afghanistan. Neither did the Afghan elites who were

¹ Portions of the statement below previously appeared in Barnett R. Rubin, "The Once and Future Defeat in Afghanistan, [War on the Rocks](#), November 1, 2021.

Washington's partners. Never in its history had the Afghan state built an effective local administration. The governors and district governors working for the centralized state relied on a partnership with informal institutions in the village (mosque, jirga, and shura). The state had rarely "extended its writ" into the villages without provoking revolts. The elites who ran the state feared the consequences of devolving power to the localities themselves.

The Taliban worked through the non-state local institutions, primarily the mosques. With their local knowledge — most Taliban operated in the areas where they had grown up — they knew exactly whom to persuade, intimidate, or kill.

"Prioritize responsive and accountable governance" was like the reassurance a fund manager might give nervous clients as he asks them for new money to pay earlier investors the above-market returns he had promised. When the Afghan government failed to be responsive and accountable, and the insurgency kept spreading, the Defense Department would ask for more troops, more money, or more time. When the money was diverted or stolen, as was inevitable when the richest country in the world throws billions of dollars at problems it does not understand in one of the poorest countries of the world, it proposed "anti-corruption" efforts to uproot the corruption it continued to fund as core functions of its effort. But by trying to compensate for unresolved political issues with infusions of force, money, and training, the United States was just postponing the day when the whole enterprise would collapse like the Ponzi scheme it was.

The Taliban leadership's safe haven in Pakistan — something absent from the classic models of counterinsurgency — meant that military efforts could not attack the Taliban's core leadership. Many critics, including me, have argued that one reason for the failure of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan was the failure to exert sufficient pressure on Pakistan to close the Taliban sanctuary. This is only true if the U.S. defeat in Vietnam was due to Washington's failure to exert sufficient pressure on the Soviet Union and China to stop supporting North Vietnam.

But there was nothing the United States could do about the fact that it was a distant offshore power, while Pakistan is a deeply entwined neighbor of Afghanistan. In Vietnam, America tried — and failed — to defeat the enemy despite its external supporters. In Afghanistan, the United States either ignored Pakistan's behavior or engaged in efforts to "change the strategic calculus" of Islamabad, as if Washington could alter the entrenched threat perceptions of Pakistan's military with economic aid or threats it could not carry out. Claims that the United States "failed" to exert sufficient pressure on Pakistan assume that there is a level of pressure that the United States could have exerted that would have forced Pakistan to change its policy. That is one of many examples of Americans' over-estimation of their own power. File under: failure to "know yourself."

The United States found itself in the situation described by the Prussian general and scholar Carl von Clausewitz, who observed, "There is nothing more common than to find considerations of supply affecting the strategic lines of a campaign and a war." Afghanistan is landlocked. All land and air routes through which Afghanistan might receive aid or engage in trade traverse Pakistan, Iran, or a combination of Russia or China with Central Asian countries. Unless the

United States persuaded Russia, China, or Iran to support its war efforts on their doorstep, Pakistan provided the sole politically and logistically feasible route for any aid or military supply relationship between the United States and Afghanistan. There was a limit to how much pressure Washington could exert against its own supply lines. Exasperated U.S. officials occasionally proposed special operations raids into Pakistan to disrupt the Taliban leadership's safe haven, but in addition to the many other reasons not to attack an ostensibly allied nuclear power backed by China, it did not appear feasible for a force whose logistics depended on Pakistan to attack Pakistan. As a Russian colleague said to me in Moscow in June 2017, "Pakistan certainly deserves whatever you do to it, but it won't work."

Throughout the war in Afghanistan, Washington was consistently losing the international leverage that it had enjoyed since 1945. Over those 20 years, the United States spent an estimated \$14 trillion dollars on wars, largely funded by debt-financed supplemental appropriations, while ignoring the decay of its own fiscal soundness, physical infrastructure, healthcare system, education system, and political institutions. In 2001, according to World Bank figures, Chinese GDP in purchasing power parity was 41 percent the size of U.S. GDP, while in 2019 Chinese GDP was 12 percent larger. To the extent that the ratio of the two GDPs serves as a rough indicator of relative power, by 2019 China's relative power compared to the United States had nearly tripled (1.12 versus 0.41).

A comparison of U.S. and Chinese policies toward Pakistan shows the consequences. On Feb. 2, 2009, shortly after he was appointed as U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Holbrooke convened a consultation at the Asia Society in New York to discuss what it would take to turn Pakistan into a reliable partner for the United States. World Bank economist Shah Javid Burki estimated that donors would need to provide Pakistan with \$40 to \$50 billion over five years to safeguard the country from economic collapse.

In response to these sorts of analyses, on Oct. 15, 2009, Obama signed into law the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act, also known as the Kerry-Lugar-Berman bill, which provided a total of \$7.5 billion of assistance for Pakistan over five years. The act expired in 2014 and was not renewed, by which time China had made the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, established in 2013, the flagship project of its Belt and Road Initiative.

The value of Chinese projects in Pakistan was estimated at \$62 billion in 2020, slightly higher than what Burki had estimated would be necessary. The availability of an increasingly stronger and more reliable alternative to the United States weakened Washington's ability to influence Pakistan.

The U.S. government also thought that its firepower and money would enable it to ignore some simple realities. Afghanistan was by a large margin the poorest country in Asia, poorer than most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and poorer even than Haiti. It also had the lowest literacy rate in Asia — the only Asian country with literacy under 50 percent and a much lower rate for women. It had the lowest life expectancy, highest maternal mortality rate, and highest infant mortality rate in Asia. Its population was scattered among a few cities and some mountain and

river valleys separated by deserts. It had less access to electricity than any other Asian country. With no alternative for survival, its farmers had accepted offers from traffickers to make Afghanistan into the world's leading provider of opium products to supply the demand from the developed world. The Afghan government had never completed a census and did not know how many people were living in Afghanistan or in the various provinces and districts, or how many of its citizens belonged to the various tribes, clans, ethnic groups, and sects. The Afghan state did not routinely issue birth or death certificates. People's names and addresses were not registered with the government or required to conform to any standardized format.

Without basic demographic data it was impossible to construct a valid list of eligible voters or to evaluate election outcomes against demographic data. Opposition political leader Dr. Abdullah Abdullah once told a U.N. electoral official that he would accept tribal voting, in which an elder brought, say, 600 cards to the polling site and claimed all the members of his clan were voting for a particular candidate — but only if the clan actually had 600 eligible voters, which no one could determine.

Under these circumstances, a winner-takes-all presidential election that gave the victor access to billions of dollars of aid and lethal force supplied by the United States could not possibly be free and fair. The only way to convince the apparent loser to accept the results was to dispatch senior U.S. officials to Kabul — the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (John Kerry) in 2009, the secretary of state (again Kerry) in 2014, and again the secretary of state (Mike Pompeo) in 2019. A government whose election outcomes are adjudicated by a foreign power with troops stationed in the country is hardly a democracy. Efforts to address some of these problems led to temporary improvements in education, healthcare, energy supply, and other indicators, but they also turned Afghanistan into one a handful of the most aid-dependent countries in the world, along with a few war-torn African countries and some island microstates. Today, Afghanistan depends for electricity on transmission lines from its neighbors, for which it now cannot pay the bills. With aid embargoed, it cannot pay the salaries of teachers and healthcare workers. The infusion of dollars made Afghanistan's exports uncompetitive and increased the country's dependence on food imports, part of the heritage of the Soviet war.

The Taliban presented a threat to Afghanistan so serious that American military planners estimated that it would require defense and security forces of over 300,000 men to defend the state, plus a long-term presence of U.S. military and contractors. They equipped the Afghan forces with weapons systems interoperable with NATO (though Afghans had been using Soviet/Russian-model weapons since the 1950s), and sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, all to be operated by a combat force that could not read the equipment manuals, if they could read at all. The United States wanted to spend about \$4 billion per year on security forces (not to mention the cost of its own presence) in a country whose estimated GDP peaked at \$20.5 billion in 2013 and stagnated and fell after the reduction in the foreign troop presence. America supplied the troops' wages, but the Afghan government's payment systems were so ineffective and corrupt that, by some estimates, by the end there were as few as 50,000 real soldiers, while the rest of the 300,000 listed on paper

were “ghosts” whose wages were skimmed off by their superiors. The Afghan forces that, according to Holbrooke’s summary of a White House discussion in December 2009, would be “our ticket out of there,” were built in such a way that they collapsed before the United States had even completed its withdrawal.

Questions from organizers:

How was the “comprehensive approach” realized? What is your assessment of the implementation and what are your proposals/recommendations for future missions taking the “comprehensive approach”?

See above. NATO members are not qualified to carry out “the comprehensive approach.”

- What developments and findings led at the end of 2009 to a change in strategy, particularly from an American perspective, and what is your assessment of the consequences resulting from the change in strategy?

The main development was the consistent increase in the amount of territory and population controlled by the Taliban. This convinced the administration that it was necessary to invest more resources to “break the momentum” of the Taliban to enable clear, hold, and build.

- From a military assessment perspective, how effective were the aid and developmental cooperation projects under the responsibility of the civilian actors and, from a military assessment perspective, how did these contribute to security and tackling corruption?

Research has shown aid and development cooperation projects had virtually no effect on building security or countering corruption.

- What strategic objectives was the Obama Administration pursuing with the implementation of the counterinsurgency-strategy (COIN) in Afghanistan? Was there a clash of interests between local and international partners and what were the results of this strategy?

The Obama administration’s sole STRATEGIC objective in Afghanistan was to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan.” The condition of Afghanistan’s state and society were not strategic objectives. An important US operational goal was to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and reduce expenditures. This led to numerous conflicts between the US and local partners.

- For Germany, the mission in Afghanistan was motivated primarily by loyalty to its partner, the USA. What was the USA’s perception of Germany’s role as a partner on the Afghanistan mission? And what is the USA’s assessment of the German interpretation of the respective mandate (e.g. in the context of ISAF – OEF tensions)? Where were the greatest differences in interpretation in this respect?

The U.S. appreciated Germany’s contribution but resented its restricted rules of engagement. In fact the rules of engagement made no difference to the outcome, which depended on factors that were not understood or taken into consideration.