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NEWS ARTICLES

Afghan Strategy Sound, But Execution Poses Challenge, Official Says

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 14, 2008 – The U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is sound and can work, but the challenge lies in executing that strategy and sustaining success over time, a Defense Department official told Congress today.

James Shinn, assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee in response to two recent reports that contend the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan needs to be fundamentally changed.

Shinn described the strategy in Afghanistan as one of clearing, holding and building. The coalition has done very well in the clearing aspect of the strategy, he said, but the other two phases are much more challenging.

When it comes to clearing Taliban and al Qaeda forces out of the country, the coalition is “winning, slowly and painfully,” Shinn said. He noted that when U.S. and Afghan forces stand and fight the Taliban, they always prevail. Much of this success is due to the Afghan National Army, he said, but the contributions of U.S. and NATO troops, who have paid a great price for their success, also play a key role. About 415 Americans have been killed in and around Afghanistan, and another 1,863 have been wounded.

“Our analysts have concluded that the Taliban usage of assassinations, of terrorism against soft civilian targets, and even to some degree the use of suicide bombs, is really in part a reaction to the success of the clearing strategy,” Shinn told the committee.

The holding and building phases of the strategy are not only more challenging, but are also more difficult to measure success in, Shinn said. Much of the holding phase is dependent on the Afghan National Police, which as an institution has less credibility than the army with Afghan citizens and a reputation for corruption in some areas, he said. He applauded the efforts of the Afghan Interior Ministry, however, in working to better train and equip the police force and empower them to provide security in areas where the Taliban have been cleared out.

The building phase of the strategy, or reconstruction, is very challenging because it doesn't have much of a base to start from, Shinn said. Much of Afghanistan's physical and human capital has been destroyed by decades of war, and even recent improvements in the gross domestic product have left the majority of Afghans in severe poverty. Compounding the situation is the drug trafficking problem that still plagues the country and has a "seriously corrosive effect on already weak state institutions," he said.

The U.S. has a five-part strategy to deal with the narcotics problem in Afghanistan, which includes public education, alternative livelihood, eradication, interdiction and law enforcement, Shinn noted. Afghanistan's agricultural economy is based on narcotics, so the only solution is to create alternate livelihoods for farmers, which is challenging because no single crop is as lucrative as poppy, he said.

Richard Boucher, assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, also testified at the hearing and emphasized that, for the counternarcotics program to work, the entire rural economy needs to be transformed.

"What we've seen in the experiences of other countries ... is the transformation of the rural economy has been a key factor," Boucher said. "The effort of bringing in roads, electricity, irrigation programs, fruit trees, transforms the rural economy so you get a better market for the goods."

The United States does have a broad-based agricultural and rural development plan for Afghanistan, but it is failing in some areas because the Taliban has established safe havens and there is a lack of governance, Boucher said. "In order to apply it and apply it thoroughly, you need to get security and you need to get the government in there," he said of the agricultural plan.

Shinn and Boucher agreed there is a risk of failure in Afghanistan if NATO becomes what Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has called a "two-tiered alliance," where some countries are willing to contribute combat forces and some are not. Shinn emphasized that the three phases of the strategy in Afghanistan are not solely the United States' responsibility.

"Execution on these three pieces involves us, our NATO allies, the (Operation Enduring Freedom) partners, certainly the (United Nations), the international community at large, and of course, most importantly, the government of Afghanistan and its citizens," Shinn said.