



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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U.S. Policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Ambassador Holbrooke and His Interagency Team

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One week before Afghanistan's elections, the Center for American Progress hosted a discussion with the Afghanistan-Pakistan Interagency Team led by **Ambassador Richard Holbrooke**. Moderator **John Podesta**, Center of American Progress president, opened by praising the multidisciplinary nature of Ambassador Holbrooke's team that optimizes delivery of security and development assistance in Afghanistan and Pakistan. **Holbrooke** began by emphasizing the mandate of the interagency team, which was established to provide an integrated civilian-led initiative that complements military efforts. The discussion unveiled the new integrated civilian approach in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Each of Holbrooke's interagency team members in turn summarized their efforts on the taskforce's various initiatives, which are broadly aimed to enhance the capacities of the Afghan government.

Civilian-led Development & International Collaboration: **Barnett R. Rubin**, Senior Advisor to Holbrooke, presented the agency's strategy, which addresses both local development and international coalition building. Setting the conditions for success in Afghanistan before the uncertain elections demands two major initiatives. The first is **enabling the government to control and govern its territory**. This comprises rebuilding sub-national authorities' connection to local communities and revitalizing locales through development programs. Rubin said that the new focus is to assist, rather than threaten communities.

The second element of the strategy is focused **on supporting a regional and international environment where players have a vested interest in Afghan stability**, this includes China, Russia and India. One component therein is directly facilitating Afghan-Pakistani relations. **Holbrooke** pointed to expanded international interest from European and Middle Eastern actors as a signal of such concerted efforts, yet there is no current dialogue with Iran.

Additionally, as Pakistan battles to consolidate its young democracy and remedy economic woes, it is also **imperative to bolster Pakistan's stability as an ally**, said **Vali Nasr**, also a Senior Advisor. On this issue, the U.S. is engaged on two fronts, contended Nasr, the first is delivering economic and energy aid to Pakistan and the second entails engagement in intense regional diplomacy to create broad international support for Pakistan's security and development needs.

Beth Dunford, Senior Development Advisor (USAID), said that the task force focuses on economic development and, with it, job creation, rule of law and governance reform, and structural development. The strategy moves away from issuing projects to large contractors—which undermine the Afghan government, **Holbrooke** claimed—and is aimed at empowering local implementers. In this way, project money can be channeled from multilateral funds to the Afghan government to increase its legitimacy and credibility. Thus, the Afghan government can take the lead on projects in the country. This increased efficiency as such centralized efforts coordinated donor activity.

Agricultural Development: **Otto J. Gonzalez**, Senior Agricultural Advisor (USDA), focused on the team's early efforts addressing Afghanistan's war-torn agricultural sector, which had been neglected previously. Today the already successful new strategy directly links U.S. efforts and the Afghan government. The current program is guided by the following objectives: increasing productivity, sustaining watersheds, building irrigation infrastructure, and improving the Ministry of Agriculture's ability to deliver services to farmers and herds. This strategy, **Holbrooke** emphasizes, puts agriculture at the center of U.S. efforts. Increased productivity compounded with the interdiction of opiates has already been immensely successful in adversely affecting the Taliban.

Militant Funding: Senior Treasury Advisor **Rami Shy** presented the new Illicit Finance Task Force's plans to block al-Qaeda and Taliban funding from domestic resources (such as poppy production and smuggling) and international sources (such as financial support from the Gulf). These efforts are coordinated with the Afghan and Pakistani governments to counter illicit funding and bribery. This entails counter-narcotics and centralized tax collection operations.

Strategic Communications & Counterpropaganda: **Ashley Bommer**, Special Advisor to Holbrooke, highlighted the 'counterpropaganda' and strategic communications efforts pursued by the interagency team. Combating militant communications is integral to the taskforce's full strategy, **Holbrooke** said. Because propaganda dominates the strategies of militant groups, U.S. efforts must counter this and "expose the true nature of the enemy," Bommer argued. This would shift the conflict from a U.S.-militant confrontation to one between the people and militants. Militant control of telecommunications resources means U.S. strategy must provide safe and reliable communications infrastructure.

Vikram Singh, DOD Senior Defense Advisor, explained that the taskforce's initiatives extend the provision of competitive and credible information to communities. Moreover, efforts are being made to build private sector and government capacities to provide communications, ultimately forging a relationship between the people and the government. The new strategy focuses on marshalling resources in a new way, to change how the U.S. uses information, he said.

Elections: **Rina Amiri**, Senior Advisor, insisted that Afghans have historically embraced elections with alacrity, in the hope of replacing violence with political stability. Importantly, August 20's election will be the first led by Afghans. Afghan enthusiasm is reflected in 17m registered voters, over 3,300 provincial candidates for 42 seats and 41 presidential candidates, including two women.

Jane Marriott, Senior Advisor (UK FCO), underscored the fact that the international community has two goals for the election: **the first is to capitalize on and sustain the policy debate that the elections provoke. The second is to build up electoral institutions and civil society mechanisms in Afghanistan.** The U.S. and the international community have declared impartiality, supporting only the importance of a legitimate process and free media. In the event that the election result is sour, the U.S. and the international community could act as arbiters.

President Obama has commented in the past that the election is the most important event for Afghanistan this year, said **Holbrooke**. Elections in a warzone are always difficult, particularly as the Taliban has expressed a interest in disrupting the electoral process. **The government nevertheless needs legitimacy. This election has been postponed since April, yet must be held as it is provisioned in the Afghan constitution.** The media coverage of the election, domestically and globally, will be the arbiter of the election's result, he said.

After the election, it will be critical to reinvigorate the government's leadership in the taskforce's 20 planned programs, including amnesty, reintegration, and anti-corruption, all of which depend on a stable police force and security.

The overall strategy, Holbrooke argued, is a series of inputs aimed to support the Afghan government. How to measure success against these inputs, however, is as of yet unclear. The military commitment to the region is not open ended, but the civilian commitment will exist for a long time. In this context, "we'll know it when we see it," he said in reference to defining success in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Holbrooke went on to explain why the U.S. remains in Afghanistan if the fight against al-Qaeda is primarily in Pakistan. Afghanistan is a fertile recruiting territory, he argued, and, unless the Taliban renounces al-Qaeda, their alliance means that both must be addressed as threats. **Abandoning the struggle in Afghanistan would mean losing the larger battle.**