

**Excerpt from General David Barno's Testimony before  
the House Armed Services Committee  
February 27, 2013:**

Before examining the size and scope of U. S. and Afghan security forces looking ahead to 2014 and beyond, it's worth returning to first principles: What vital interests are the United States seeking to defend in Afghanistan and the region after the end of 2014? What are the absolute essentials? Only by fully understanding this basic, minimalist expression of our overall policy goals for the region, can we determine what level of military and financial support will be required in Afghanistan for the this new uncharted period. We all recognize as well that the strategic context of ever-tighter budgets at home driven by years of trillion dollar deficits and a \$16.4 trillion national debt will unquestionably have an impact on decisions on our future commitments in Afghanistan.

In that light then, we must look to U. S. vital interests. As I have noted in previous testimony to this committee in 2011, in my judgment there are three U. S. vital interests at stake in Afghanistan and this region post-2014: 1) preventing the region's use as a base for terror groups to attack the United States and our allies; 2) ensuring nuclear weapons or nuclear materials do not fall into the hands of terrorists or other hostile actors and, 3) preventing a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan.

In my estimation, protecting these vital U. S. interests in the coming years requires a U. S. base in the region from which to exert influence on all the regional actors, and to keep relentless pressure on terror groups targeting the United States and our allies. Afghanistan presents the most logical and likely location for such a sustained, if necessarily limited, U. S. military presence. The enduring mission of U. S. forces under this scenario is two-fold: counter-terrorism – to continue to attack al Qaeda elements in the region who pose a transnational threat to the United States and our allies around the world; and support for Afghan security forces - - to train, advise and assist them in their ongoing fight against the Taliban.

In order to continue to protect these interests after 2014, but do so in a way that husbands taxpayers' scarce dollars, the United States will have to significantly reshape its military presence in Afghanistan. This effort is now underway. The President recently announced a withdrawal of 34,000 of the remaining 66,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan between now and this time next year. The

bulk of these troops will continue to serve in Afghanistan throughout the coming April-to-October fighting season, thus preserving maximum flexibility for U.S. commanders on the ground. But the mission of these remaining troops has now shifted inexorably to support for Afghan forces in their fight against the Taliban, rather than taking on that direct combat role themselves. This is a new direction, one that has not been the focus of U. S. efforts for most of the past 11 year.

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