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The President's News Conference With President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan
January 11, 2013

President Obama. Good afternoon, everybody. Please have a seat.

It is my pleasure to welcome President Karzai back to the White House, as well as his delegation. We last saw each other during the NATO summit in my hometown of Chicago, a city that reflects the friendship between our peoples, including many Afghan Americans, as well as the Karzai family.

President Karzai. Yes.

President Obama. So, Mr. President, welcome.

We meet at a critical moment. The 33,000 additional forces that I ordered to Afghanistan have served with honor. They've completed their mission and, as promised, returned home this past fall. The transition is well underway, and soon, nearly 90 percent of Afghans will live in areas where Afghan forces are in the lead for their own security.

This year, we'll mark another milestone: Afghan forces will take the lead for security across the entire country. And by the end of next year, 2014, the transition will be complete: Afghans will have full responsibility for their security, and this war will come to a responsible end.

This progress is only possible because of the incredible sacrifices of our troops and our diplomats, the forces of our many coalition partners, and the Afghan people, who have endured extraordinary hardship. In this war, more than 2,000 of America's sons and daughters have given their lives. These are patriots that we honor today, tomorrow, and forever. And as we announced today, the next month, I will present our Nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, to Staff Sergeant Clinton Romesha for his heroic service in Afghanistan.

Today, because of the courage of our citizens, President Karzai and I have been able to review our shared strategy. With the devastating blows we've struck against Al Qaida, our core objective—the reason we went to war in the first place—is now within reach: ensuring that Al Qaida can never again use Afghanistan to launch attacks against our country. At the same time, we pushed the Taliban out of their strongholds. Today, most major cities—and most Afghans—are more secure, and insurgents have continued to lose territory.

Meanwhile, Afghan forces continue to grow stronger. As planned, some 352,000 Afghan soldiers and police are now in training or on duty. Most missions are already being led by Afghan forces. And of all the men and women in uniform in Afghanistan, the vast majority are Afghans who are fighting and dying for their country every day.

We still face significant challenges. But because of this progress, our transition is on track. At the NATO summit last year, we agreed with our coalition partners that Afghan forces will take the lead for security in mid-2013.

President Karzai and his team have been here for several days. We've shared a vision for how we're going to move ahead. We've consulted with our coalition partners, and we will continue to do so. And today we agreed that as Afghan forces take the lead and as President Karzai announces the final phase of the transition, coalition forces will move to a support role this spring. Our troops will continue to fight alongside Afghans, when needed. But let me say it as plainly as I can. Starting this spring, our troops will have a different mission: training, advising, assisting Afghan forces. It will be a historic moment and another step toward full Afghan sovereignty, something I know that President Karzai cares deeply about, as do the Afghan people.

This sets the stage for the further reduction of coalition forces. We've already reduced our presence in Afghanistan to roughly 66,000 U.S. troops. I've pledged we'll continue to bring our forces home at a steady pace, and in the coming months, I'll announce the next phase of our

drawdown, a responsible drawdown that protects the gains our troops have made.

President Karzai and I also discussed the nature of our security cooperation after 2014. Our teams continue to work toward a security agreement. And as they do, they will be guided by our respect for Afghan sovereignty and by our two long-term tasks, which will be very specific and very narrow: first, training and assisting Afghan forces; and second, targeting counterterrorism missions—targeted counterterrorism missions against Al Qaida and its affiliates. Our discussions will focus on how best to achieve these two tasks after 2014, and it's our hope that we can reach an agreement this year.

Ultimately, security gains must be matched by political progress. So we recommitted our nations to a reconciliation process between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. President Karzai updated me on the Afghan Government's road map to peace. And today we agreed that this process should be advanced by the opening of a Taliban office to facilitate talks.

Reconciliation also requires constructive support from across the region, including Pakistan. We welcome recent steps that have been taken in that regard, and we'll look for more tangible steps, because a stable and secure Afghanistan is in the interest not only of the Afghan people and the United States, but of the entire region.

And finally, we reaffirmed the strategic partnership that we signed last year in Kabul, an enduring partnership between two sovereign nations. This includes deepening ties of trade, commerce, strengthening institutions, development, education, and opportunities for all Afghans: men and women, boys and girls. And this sends a clear message to Afghans and to the region: As Afghans stand up, they will not stand alone; the United States, and the world, stands with them.

Now, let me close by saying that this continues to be a very difficult mission. Our forces continue to serve and make tremendous sacrifices every day. The Afghan people make significant sacrifices every day. Afghan forces still need to grow stronger. We remain vigilant against insider attacks. Lasting peace and security will require governance and development that delivers for the Afghan people and an end to safe havens for Al Qaida and its ilk. All this will continue to be our work.

But make no mistake: Our path is clear, and we are moving forward. Every day, more Afghans are stepping up and taking responsibility for their own security. And as they do, our troops will come home. And next year, this long war will come to a responsible end.

President Karzai, I thank you and your delegation for the progress we've made together and for your commitment to the goals that we share: a strong and sovereign Afghanistan where Afghans find security, peace, prosperity, and dignity. And in pursuit of that future, Afghanistan will have a long-term partner in the United States of America.

Mr. President.

President Karzai. Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. President, for the very gracious and warm welcome to me and the Afghan delegation on this visit to Washington and for bearing with us, as I mentioned during our talks, in the Blair House, with all the crowds that we have there.

The President and I discussed today in great detail all the relevant issues between the two countries. I was happy to see that we have made progress on some of the important issues for Afghanistan. Concerning Afghan sovereignty, we agreed on the complete return of detention centers and detainees to Afghan sovereignty and that this will be implemented soon after my return to Afghanistan. We also discussed all aspects of transition to Afghan governance and security.

I'm very happy to hear from the President, as we also discussed it earlier, that in spring this year, the Afghan forces will be fully responsible for providing security and protection to the Afghan people and that the international forces, the American forces, will be no longer present in Afghan villages, that the task will be that of the Afghan forces to provide for the Afghan people in security and protection.

That we also agreed on the steps that we should be taking to—in the peace process, which is of highest priority to Afghanistan. We agreed on allowing a Taliban office in Qatar, in Doha, where the Taliban will engage in direct talks with the representatives of the Afghan High Council for Peace, where we will be seeking the help of relevant regional countries, including Pakistan, where we'll be trying our best, together with the United States and our other allies, to return peace and stability to Afghanistan as soon as possible and employing all the means that we have within our power to do that so the Afghan people can live in security and peace and work for their prosperity and educate their children.

The President and I also discussed the economic transition in Afghanistan and all that entails for Afghanistan. Once the transition to Afghan forces is completed, once the bulk of these international forces have withdrawn from Afghanistan, we hope that the dividends of that transition economically to Afghanistan will be beneficial to the Afghan people and will not have adverse effects on Afghan economy and the prosperity that we have gained in the past many years.

We also discussed the issue of election in Afghanistan and the importance of election for the Afghan people, with the hope that we'll be conducting a free and fair election in Afghanistan, where our friends in the international community—in particular, the United States—will be assisting in conducting those elections; of course, where Afghanistan will have the right environment for conducting elections without interference and without undue concern in that regard for the Afghan people.

We also discussed in a bit of detail and in the environment that we have, all aspects of the bilateral security agreement between Afghanistan and the United States, and I informed the President that the Afghan people—already in the *loya jirga* that we called for—the strategic partnership agreement between us and the United States, have given their approval to this relationship, and they value it as one that's good for Afghanistan. So, in that context, the bilateral security agreement is one that the Afghan people approve. And I'm sure we will conduct it in detail, where both the interests of the United States and the interests of Afghanistan will be kept in mind.

We had a number of other issues also to talk about. During our conversations, and perhaps many times in that conversation, beginning with the conversation, of course, I thanked the President for the help that the United States has given to the Afghan people, for all that we have gained in the past 10 years, and that those gains will be kept by any standard while we are working for peace and stability in Afghanistan, including the respect for Afghan Constitution.

I also thanked the President and endorsed with him the sacrifices of American men and women in uniform and those of other countries. Accordingly, I also informed President Obama of the sacrifices of the Afghan people—of the immense sacrifices of the Afghan people in the past 10 years—both of the servicemen and of the Afghan people.

I'll be going back to Afghanistan this evening to bring to the Afghan people the news of Afghanistan standing shoulder to shoulder with America as a sovereign, independent country, but in cooperation and in partnership.

Thank you, Mr. President, for the hospitality.

President Obama. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

Okay, we've got two questions each, I think, from U.S. and Afghan press. I will start with Scott Wilson of the Washington Post.

U.S. Military Operations in Afghanistan/U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan/Bilateral Security Agreement Negotiations

Q. Thank you, Mr. President and President Karzai.

Mr. President, does moving up the deadline for the transition to an Afghan security role lead in the spring mean you'll be winding down U.S. troops faster than you expected this year? And as specifically as possible, how many troops do you expect to leave in Afghanistan beyond 2014 for the two missions you outlined? And would you consider leaving any

troops in Afghanistan beyond that date without an immunity agreement for their actions?

And, President Karzai, you've spoken often about the threat the American presence in Afghanistan poses to the—your nation's sovereignty. But I'm wondering if you will be considering and working on behalf of an immunity agreement to preserve some U.S. forces in Afghanistan after the 2014 date and how many U.S. troops you would accept after that time.

Thank you.

President Obama. Scott, our first task has been to meet the transition plan that we set first in Lisbon, then in Chicago. And because of the progress that's been made by our troops, because of the progress that's been made in terms of Afghan security forces, their capacity to take the lead, we are able to meet those goals and accelerate them somewhat.

So let me repeat: What's going to happen this spring is that Afghans will be in the lead throughout the country. That doesn't mean that coalition forces, including U.S. forces, are no longer fighting. They will still be fighting alongside Afghan troops. It does mean, though, that Afghans will have taken the lead and our presence, the nature of our work will be different. We will be in a training, assisting, advising role.

Obviously, we will still have troops there, and that means that our men and women will still be in harm's way, that there will still be the need for force protection. The environment is going to still be very dangerous. But what we've seen is, is that Afghan soldiers are stepping up, at great risk to themselves, and that allows us then to make this transition during the spring.

What that translates into precisely in terms of how this drawdown of U.S. troop proceeds is something that isn't yet fully determined. I'm going to be, over the coming weeks, getting recommendations from General Allen and other commanders on the ground. They will be designing and shaping a responsible plan to make sure that we're not losing the gains that have already been made, to make sure that we're in a position to support Afghan units when they're in theater, and to make sure that our folks are also protected even as we're drawing down.

So I can't give you a precise number at this point. I'll probably make a separate announcement once I've gotten recommendations from troops—from the generals and our commanders in terms of what that drawdown might look like.

With respect to post-2014, we've got two goals, and the—our main conversation today was establishing a meeting of the minds in terms of what those goals would be with a follow-on presence of U.S. troops: number one, to train, assist, and advise Afghan forces so that they can maintain their own security; and number two, making sure that we can continue to go after remnants of Al Qaida or other affiliates that might threaten our homeland.

That is a very limited mission, and it is not one that would require the same kind of footprint, obviously, that we've had over the last 10 years in Afghanistan.

Similar to the issue of drawdown, I'm still getting recommendations from the Pentagon and our commanders on the ground in terms of what that would look like. And when we have more information about that, I will be describing that to the American people.

I think President Karzai's primary concern—and obviously, you'll hear directly from him—is making sure that Afghan sovereignty is respected. And if we have a follow-on force of any sort past 2014, it's got to be at the invitation of the Afghan Government, and they have to feel comfortable with it.

I will say—and I've said to President Karzai—that we have arrangements like this with countries all around the world, and nowhere do we have any kind of security agreement with a country without immunity for our troops. That's how I, as Commander in Chief, can make sure that our folks are protected in carrying out very difficult missions.

And so I think President Karzai understands that. I don't want to get ahead of ourselves in terms of the negotiations that are still remaining on the bilateral security agreement, but I think it's fair to say that, from my perspective at least, it will not be possible for us to have any

kind of U.S. troop presence post-2014 without assurances that our men and women who are operating there are in some way subject to the jurisdiction of another country. Okay?

President Karzai. Well, sir, the bilateral security agreement is in mind for the interests of both countries. We understand that the issue of immunity is of very specific importance for the United States, as was, for us, the issue of sovereignty and detentions and the continued presence of international forces in Afghan villages and the very conduct of the war itself.

With those issues resolved, as we did today, part of it—the rest was done earlier—I can go to the Afghan people and argue for immunity for U.S. troops in Afghanistan in a way that Afghan sovereignty will not be compromised, in a way that Afghan law will not be compromised, in a way that the provisions that we arrive at through our talks will give the United States the satisfaction of what it seeks and will also provide the Afghan people the benefits that they are seeking through this partnership and the subsequent agreement.

Q. Do you have any sense of how many troops you would be willing to accept?

President Karzai. That's not for us to decide. It's an issue for the United States. Numbers are not going to make a difference to the situation in Afghanistan. It's the broader relationship that will make a difference to Afghanistan and beyond in the region. The specifics of numbers are issues that the military will decide, and Afghanistan will have no particular concern when we are talking of numbers and how they are deployed.

An Afghan press? English-speaking press?

[*At this point, President Karzai addressed reporters briefly in Dari, and no transcript was provided.*]

U.S. Military Operations in Afghanistan/Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

Q. I am Abdul Qadeer Merzai, correspondent for Ariana Television, Kabul, Afghanistan. I prefer to ask my question to my own language.

[*The reporter asked a question in Dari, and it was translated by an interpreter as follows.*]

Mr. President, the missions of—combat missions of United States after 2014—how this mission will be? How will it be resembling the same mission as it was during 11 years? Or is there a difference, different kind of missions? Those who are in Pakistan, particularly the safe havens that are in Pakistan, what kind of policy will you have? Thank you.

President Obama. Just to repeat, our main reason, should we have troops in Afghanistan post-2014 at the invitation of the Afghan Government, will be to make sure that we are training, assisting, and advising Afghan security forces who have now taken the lead for and are responsible for security throughout Afghanistan, and an interest that the United States has—the very reason that we went to Afghanistan in the first place—and that is to make sure that Al Qaida and its affiliates cannot launch an attack against the United States or other countries from Afghan soil.

We believe that we can achieve that mission in a way that's very different from the very active presence that we've had in Afghanistan over the last 11 years. President Karzai has emphasized the strains that U.S. troop presences in Afghan villages, for example, have created. Well, that's not going to be a strain that exists if there is a follow-up operation because that will not be our responsibility, that will be the responsibility of the Afghan National Security Forces, to maintain peace and order and stability in Afghan villages, in Afghan territory.

So I think, although, obviously, we're still 2 years away, I can say with assurance that this is a very different mission and a very different task and a very different footprint for the U.S. if we are able to come to an appropriate agreement.

And with respect to Pakistan's—and safe havens there, Afghanistan and the United States and Pakistan all have an interest in reducing the threat of extremism in some of these border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. And that's going to require more than simply military actions. That's really going to require

political and diplomatic work between Afghanistan and Pakistan. And the United States obviously will have an interest in facilitating and participating in cooperation between the two sovereign countries.

But as President Karzai, I think, has indicated, it's very hard to imagine a stability and peace in the region if Pakistan and Afghanistan don't come to some basic agreement and understanding about the threat of extremism to both countries and both Governments and both capitals. And I think you're starting to see a greater awareness of that on the part of the Pakistani Government.

[*President Karzai spoke in Dari, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.*]

President Karzai. The question that you have made about—we talked about this issue in details today about the prisoners, about the detention centers. All of these will transfer to the Afghan sovereignty, where—and the U.S. forces will pull out from villages, will go to their bases, where—and Afghan sovereignty will be restored.

And after 2014, we are working on it, on this relations. This relation will have a different nature and will have—will base on different principles. It will resemble probably to Turkey-United States—to Turkey or Germany. We are studying these relationships, and we will do that.

U.S. Military Objectives in Afghanistan/Afghanistan-U.S. Relations

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. As you contemplate the end of this war, can you say as Commander in Chief that the huge human and financial costs that this has entailed can be justified, given the fact that the Afghanistan that the world will leave behind is somewhat diminished from the visions of reconstruction and democracy that were kind of prevalent at the beginning of the war?

And, President Karzai, many independent studies have criticized Afghanistan for corruption and poor governance. Do you stand by your assertion last month that much of this is due to the influence of foreigners? And are you completely committed to stepping down as President after the elections next year?

President Obama. I want us to remember why we went to Afghanistan. We went into Afghanistan because 3,000 Americans were viciously murdered by a terrorist organization that was operating openly and at the invitation of those who were then ruling Afghanistan.

It was absolutely the right thing to do for us to go after that organization, to go after the host Government that had aided and abetted—or at least allowed for these attacks to take place. And because of the heroic work of our men and women in uniform, and because of the cooperation and sacrifices of Afghans who had also been brutalized by that then-host Government, we achieved our central goal, which is—or have come very close to achieving our central goal, which is to decapacitate Al Qaida, to dismantle them, to make sure that they can't attack us again.

And everything that we've done over the last 10 years, from the perspective of the U.S. national security interest, have been focused on that aim. And I have—at the end of this conflict, we are going to be able to say that the sacrifices that were made by those men and women in uniform has brought about the goal that we sought.

Now, what we also recognized very early on was that it was in our national security interest to have a stable, sovereign Afghanistan that was a responsible international actor, that was in partnership with us, and that that required Afghanistan to have its own security capacity and to be on a path that was more likely to achieve prosperity and peace for its own people. And I think President Karzai would be the first to acknowledge that Afghanistan still has work to do to accomplish those goals, but there's no doubt that the possibility of peace and prosperity in Afghanistan today is higher than before we went in. And that is also in part because of the sacrifices that the American people have made during this long conflict.

So I think that—have we achieved everything that some might have imagined us

achieving in the best of scenarios? Probably not. This is a human enterprise, and you fall short of the ideal. Did we achieve our central goal? And have we been able, I think, to shape a strong relationship with a responsible Afghan Government that is willing to cooperate with us to make sure that it is not a launching pad for future attacks against the United States? We have achieved that goal. We are in the process of achieving that goal. And for that, I think we have to thank our extraordinary military, intelligence, and diplomatic teams, as well as the cooperation of the Afghan Government and the Afghan people.

President Karzai. Sir, on the question of corruption, whether it has a foreign element to it, if I have correctly understood your question, there is corruption in Afghanistan. There is corruption in the Afghan Government that we are fighting against, employing various means and methods. We have succeeded in certain ways. But if your question is whether we are satisfied, of course not.

And on the corruption that is foreign in origin, but occurring in Afghanistan, I have been very clear and explicit, and I don't think that Afghanistan can see less corruption unless there is cooperation between us and our international partners on correcting some of the methods or applications of delivery of assistance to Afghanistan, without cooperation and without recognition of the problems.

On elections, for me, the greatest of my achievements, eventually, seen by the Afghan people, will be a proper, well-organized, interference-free election in which the Afghan people can elect their next President. And certainly, I would be a retired President and very happily a retired President.

President Obama. Last question from one of yours.

Status of Women in Afghanistan

Q. My name is Mujahid Kakar from Tolo TV, Afghanistan. My question is to you, Mr. President. Afghan women fears that they will be the real victim of reconciliation process in Afghanistan. What assurances you can give them that they will not suffer because of that process?

Thank you.

President Obama. Well, the United States has been very clear that any peace process, any reconciliation process must be Afghan led. It is not for the United States to determine what the terms of this peace will be. But what we have also been very clear about is that, from our perspective, it is not possible to reconcile without the Taliban renouncing terrorism, without them recognizing the Afghan Constitution and recognizing that if there are changes that they want to make to how the Afghan Government operates, then there is a orderly constitutional process to do that, and that you can't resort to violence.

The Afghan Constitution protects the rights of Afghan women. And the United States strongly believes that Afghanistan cannot succeed unless it gives opportunity to its women. We believe that about every country in the world.

And so we will continue to voice very strongly support for the Afghan Constitution, its protection of minorities, its protection of women. And we think that a failure to provide that protection not only will make reconciliation impossible to achieve, but also would make Afghanistan's long-term development impossible to achieve.

The single best indicator, or one of the single best indicators, of a country's prosperity around the world is how does it treat its women. Does it educate that half of the population? Does it give them opportunity? When it does, you unleash the power of everyone, not just some. And I think there was great wisdom in Afghanistan ratifying a constitution that recognized that. That should be part of the legacy of these last 10 years.

President Karzai. Indeed. Indeed.

President Obama. Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 1:40 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to S. Sgt. Clinton Romesha, USA; and Gen. John R. Allen, USMC, commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan.