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CNAS National Security Experts Comment on President Obama's Afghanistan Policy

Washington, D.C., December 1, 2009 - Following President Obama's address to the nation on his Afghanistan policy, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) released the following statements:

NATHANIEL FICK, Chief Executive Officer: "The President has chosen the best of his bad options in Afghanistan by clarifying U.S. objectives there, bolstering international commitment to the mission, and signaling American resolve. What is most important over the next year is altering the perceived trajectory and momentum of the war--in the eyes of Americans, our allies, the enemy, and most of all, the Afghan people. Balancing resolve with flexibility is key: the U.S. has many interests around the world, and so must avoid succumbing to strategic distraction. If the President and his advisors can avoid falling in love with their plan--remaining realists focused on U.S. interests and what's achievable--then executing this strategy well offers the best chance of stability in Afghanistan and South Asia."

JOHN NAGL, President: "President Obama has led his national security team through a very thorough analytical process and determined that, although there are no perfect answers to the many problems Afghanistan faces, a well-resourced counterinsurgency strategy is the best option available. This strategy will protect the Afghan population with international forces now and build Afghan security forces that in time will allow an American drawdown--leaving behind a more capable Afghan government and a more secure region which no longer threatens the United States and our allies."

KRISTIN LORD, Vice President and Director of Studies: "Increasing security in Afghanistan is critical to achieving U.S. objectives. Yet, with all the talk of troop levels, it is easy to overlook the fact that political and development strategies are at least as important. President Obama's private deliberations have focused intensively on these vital factors. It is now time for the President and his cabinet to explain to the Congress and the American people how the U.S. will use diplomacy, development, and strategic public engagement to enhance the capacity and legitimacy of the Afghan government, encourage Afghanistan's neighbors to promote stability in Afghanistan and the broader region, reduce support for the Taliban, and contribute to a strong Afghan military and economy that will marginalize the Taliban and its influence over time."

PATRICK CRONIN, Senior Advisor and Senior Director of the Asia-Pacific Program:

"This was the most important decision and most crucial speech of President Obama's young tenure. Hopefully the discussion of a strategy centered on countering violent extremists and stabilizing Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan will transcend the headline about committing more troops. Importantly, the President squarely addressed the largely missing political and economic dimensions of the conflict on which military success will hinge. Almost from the time this war started we have espoused a comprehensive approach based on '3 D's' of defense, diplomacy, and development. New force deployments will allow us to fully support the defense needs of an effective counterinsurgency. Limiting the level of our state-building efforts and tying assistance to measurable benchmarks of good governance, can help prevent us from an open-ended commitment, but it still does not answer the question of whether our diplomatic and development tools--our civilian components, if you will--are up to the task ahead. Despite a tough love message to President Karzai about curbing corruption, our political strategy remains fuzzy and our regional strategy, beyond Pakistan, remains incomplete. Meanwhile, our development readiness is low because of our tardiness in creating a civilian surge (not to mention appointing an Administrator), our unwillingness to accept the high cost of assistance in a war zone (much of which is short-term support for counterinsurgency and security and not development), and our reluctance to use alternative mechanisms for delivering assistance (including bottom-up approaches such as the World Bank's National Solidarity Program, which reaches some 22,000 villages). Perhaps we will be successful in building a more robust Afghan army and police and turning the momentum against the Taliban over the next 18 months. And perhaps a more effective international and whole-of-government approach will gradually emerge; but it will take more whip-cracking than a single speech from the White House."

RICHARD FONTAINE, Senior Fellow: "By embracing a well-resourced counterinsurgency approach in Afghanistan, the President has adopted the strategy with the greatest possibility of success - though there exists no guarantee of victory in this war. And in the midst of this decision, it's worth noting several sobering realities. First, as the operational tempo of U.S. forces goes up, American casualties will increase - whether we are winning or losing. Second, while we should all hope for a successful diplomatic offensive to garner up to an additional 10,000 NATO combat troops, the reality is that the alliance will likely contribute less - and that an already Americanized war will become even more so. Third, while the desire by a war-weary American public to hear a clearly articulated exit strategy is perfectly understandable, emphasizing the way out will undermine our attempts to convince regional actors that we are staying - and make them more reluctant to side with the coalition. Fourth, the stakes in this war are simply enormous - for the people of Afghanistan, for the stability of South and Central Asia, for the future of the worldwide jihadist movement, and for the national security interests of the United States. And so though there is no guarantee of success, and while the price in American blood and treasure has been enormous, the President is right to make a major effort to prevail in Afghanistan."

ROBERT D. KAPLAN, Senior Fellow: "In calling for 30,000 more troops, President Barack Obama is solidifying the budding strategic partnership with India and putting Pakistan between a rock and a hard stone. India requires a relatively stable and westernized polity in Afghanistan that will not serve as an Islamic rear base for its rival Pakistan, which is why India has been heavily invested in the government of Hamid Karzai, who previously studied in India. India has opened consulates throughout Afghanistan and was uncomfortable with the barrage of anti-Karzai criticism coming out of Washington. Obama's decision to add troops will, therefore, bring a sigh of relief to New Delhi."

Pakistan's strategic calculus is different. The Pakistani military has been willing to show some resolve in battling the Taliban inside Pakistan, but it still sees Karzai as a pro-Indian enemy whom it would like to see undermined, rather than built up as Obama is now intent on doing, even if aid money bypasses him and goes directly to local governments. But since Pakistan gets military aid, including spare parts, from the United States, it cannot openly sabotage Obama's efforts. Thus will arise the principal tension in Obama's new policy - and one of the tensions that will help define his presidency - keeping Pakistan on board. The degree to which he can woo Islamabad will directly correlate with the success he hopes to achieve. Both Iran and Russia are conflicted over Afghanistan: they oppose the Sunni Muslim Taliban - Iran is Shia and Russia fears a radicalized Central Asia. But the fact that Obama is now forthright behind a troop surge may cause Tehran and Moscow to make choices, which hopefully will be in America's interests."

THOMAS E. RICKS, Senior Fellow: "I hope people in the administration don't think that the last 90 days of agonizing policy review were the hard part of handling the war in Afghanistan. That comes now. I have three questions tonight: Can the Afghan government stop being its own worst enemy, doing something about its corruption and abuses? Will the Pakistani government get serious about combating terrorism? And will the president be able to keep the American people behind him as American casualties increase?"

ANDREW EXUM, Fellow: "President Obama deserves credit for making a very difficult decision to commit more troops to the war in Afghanistan in the face of an American public grown weary by eight years of war. These new troops will allow the command in Afghanistan to both better protect the Afghan people from the Taliban while at the same time speeding up the rate at which we can train and field new units of Afghan soldiers and police. As important as the troops, though, is the message. President Obama must send a message to both the Afghan people - who must choose sides in this conflict at great personal risk - and the Taliban's supporters in Pakistan that our interests in and commitment to Afghanistan are enduring. At the same time, though, President Obama must remind Afghanistan's political leaders and assure the American people that Afghans themselves will soon take the lead in administering Afghanistan and protecting its peoples. Balancing these dual messages will be President Obama's most difficult task, and the president did not do that very well tonight."

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