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U.S. Senator Urges Congress Not to Undercut U.S. Efforts in Afghanistan

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The U.S. goal of handing over security duties to Afghan forces by 2014 is possible if Congress does not undercut operations in the war-torn country, a U.S. senator said Wednesday.

"Most of the people in Congress who are voting to accelerate withdrawal have never been there," said Lindsey Graham, a Republican from South Carolina.

"If we as Congress accelerate the withdrawal schedule because it's popular at home, we will undercut all the gains we have made," he said in a speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Americans are most concerned with the economy and jobs these days, and the nearly decade-long war in Afghanistan does not rank highly on their list of top priorities. Moreover, some lawmakers in recent years have suggested pulling the plug on U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

"My belief is that the ticket home is to keep the model we have in place, build upon it and make sure the American Congress doesn't undercut it," Graham said.

"We are on the verge, in my view, of turning this thing around," he said.

In particular, the senator called on lawmakers to fund the civilian agencies working alongside U.S. forces, such as USAID. The military civilian partnership, although broken a few years back, is now "the most robust I have ever seen," Graham said.

U.S. civilian forces in Afghanistan have a number of responsibilities, from development to improving the judicial system.

"The civilian partners in this effort to secure Afghanistan are as important as any brigade we have," he said. "What I would like to see this summer is for Congress to fully fund the civilian side as well as the military side."

"Because our ticket home is to leave behind an Afghan army and police force that can secure the population, a judicial system better than the Taliban, and governance that can provide basic economic and social justice, better than the Taliban," Graham said.

Graham, just back from a trip to the war-ravaged country, said the deployment of 30,000 U.S. surge troops last year was a game changer.

In addition, 18 months ago, 10 percent of Afghan security forces passed NATO's rifle skills standards, and 20 percent of those graduating from the country's non-commissioned officers' academy were literate, he said.

Now, 90,000 more Afghan security forces have been added, and 90 percent of those coming out of the training regime are NATO-qualified, with the NCO core being around 70 percent literate, he said.

Since December 2009, 6,000 new recruits have been added monthly to the Afghan police force and army, and the retention rates for the army are about 60 percent, which is in line with Western standards, he said.

CRITICS SAY WAR STILL GOING BADLY FOR U.S.

Critics, however, have argued that the war in Afghanistan has not turned a corner, as Graham claimed.

Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, said that this month was the bloodiest in the embattled country since 2007 and that insurgents are making gains in the north.

"The U.S. can win the Afghan war so long as it focuses more narrowly on al-Qaeda, rather than the Taliban and its associated offshoots, and so long as it limits the mission to counter terrorism, rather than the counter-insurgency or nation-building campaign," she said.

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And while it is possible for the United States to hand over security responsibility to Afghan forces by 2014 -- the official deadline to withdraw U.S. troops -- that does not mean everything will run smoothly, Innocent said.

"The (Afghan) security forces are ineffective and still largely unprofessional," she said. "Nevertheless, their success or failure should not be the standard for U.S. scaledown."

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