

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Human Rights, Deeper Ties Top U.S. Agenda in Asia-Pacific

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer | 21 March 2013

Washington – The Obama administration is striving for deeper ties with the Asia-Pacific region, but with an emphasis on strengthening democracies and protections for human rights, U.S. officials told senators March 21.

“Over the last four years, the U.S. government has made a deliberate, strategic effort to broaden and deepen our engagement in the region in what has come to be known as the ‘rebalance’ to the Asia-Pacific,” Joseph Yun, acting assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, told the Senate Foreign Relations' Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

This “rebalance,” Yun said in prepared remarks, includes boosting economic growth and trade, deepening alliances, strengthening relationships with emerging powers, expanding good governance, and deterring conflicts. “And while the rebalance reflects the importance the U.S. government places on our strategic and economic engagement in the Asia-Pacific, the dimension that binds the entire strategy together is our support for advancing democracy and human rights,” he said.

“The Asia-Pacific region has shown the greatest progress in the world in achieving steady gains in political rights and civil liberties,” Yun said, citing strides made in Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Thailand and Taiwan.

“And perhaps the most striking example of all in recent history is Burma,” Yun said, “where positive developments on a range of concerns of the international community have allowed us to open a new chapter in bilateral relations.”

According to Daniel Baer, deputy assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, “Burma’s budding democratic transition will succeed only if the country’s civil society is strong and can help drive it.”

“That’s why,” Baer said in his prepared remarks, “we continue to press the Burmese government to ensure that the political leaders recently released from Burmese prisons return to society with their full civil rights restored and with their academic and professional credentials recognized. These men and women will be critical building blocks of a new, robust civil society in Burma and we must support them.”

Baer lauded the Burmese government’s efforts to cooperate with civil society, opposition party representatives, and the new national human rights commission to work through remaining political prisoner

cases. He also cited new laws in Burma that have led to the registration of more than 400 enterprise-level unions and a budding institution for dispute resolution, which the United States supports through grants to the International Labour Organization.

Baer added that it is crucial for Burma to ease its restrictive civil society law so nongovernmental agencies are able to operate freely and fundamental freedoms of assembly and association are “consistent with international best practices.”

Senator Benjamin Cardin of Maryland, chairman of the East Asia and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee, said that Burma – “long one of the region’s most authoritarian systems” – has made moves in the past two years toward greater political freedom. “Helping Burma have free and fair elections in 2015 will be a top U.S. government priority,” Cardin said.

Cardin said the United States will continue to work with regional organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Pacific Islands Forum, to institute and strengthen reform throughout the region.

“ASEAN has taken first steps,” Cardin said, “towards recognizing the importance of protecting human rights with the foundation of the Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and the 2012 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. But these are just first steps,” he said. “We need to look at what these commitments are about, whether they need to be strengthened, and how we can make sure that there is a way to hold countries accountable to basic human rights.”

Yun said the United States has more work to do in engaging ASEAN in its “historic attempt” to address the importance of promoting and protecting human rights in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN announced the adoption of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in November 2012, Yun said. But he added: “We are deeply concerned that many of the declaration’s principles and articles could weaken and erode universal rights and fundamental freedoms as contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

“We urge ASEAN, in consultation with civil society, to amend and strengthen its declaration to reflect a commitment to protect and advance fully the fundamental freedoms of its people and to bring the document in line with the standards embodied in the UDHR and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” Yun said.

New Development Approach Stresses Partnerships, USAID's Shah Says

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 21 March 2013

Washington — Since 2010, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has shifted its approach to development assistance, emphasizing public-private partnerships, channeling funds to local governments and organizations with knowledge and expertise to create sustainable change, and expanding its partner base to include philanthropies, academia, faith-based groups and diaspora, said Rajiv Shah, the agency's administrator.

"If the old model was hiring a contractor to build a road, the new model is partnering with engines of American innovation ... to help nations build innovation economies and democratic societies connected to our own," Shah said at the March 20 launch of the USAID *Forward Progress Report* at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington policy research group.

The report details region by region USAID's performance, using measures that tracked agency efforts to rebuild its capacity and strengthen its impact, Shah said.

He said that today, private capital flows "vastly exceed" official aid and that companies in all sectors and entrepreneurs, "seek a foothold at the intersection of emerging markets and social good."

USAID's new results-oriented approach requires "tough choices about where our work will have the greatest impact," Shah said, adding that those choices included cutting 22 program areas and pulling out of 38 countries since 2010.

At the same time, USAID has increased its support for local institutions by 50 percent. In 2012, USAID awarded nearly \$750 million to local institutions in 73 countries, Shah said.

He said USAID also has greatly expanded its Development Credit Authority, using loan guarantees to unlock large sources of local capital for small businesses. In 2012, he said, the agency approved 38 credit guarantees to mobilize a record \$700 million in commercial capital, or \$500 million more than it did in 2011. This capital will empower more than 1 million entrepreneurs and 140,000 businesses, he added.

USAID's new development approach incorporates best practices used by other agencies, Shad said. He pointed to Peace Corps, which engages young volunteers to implement development projects, and to the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, which mobilizes private capital to help solve development challenges. Another

example is the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which conditions aid on a country's willingness to govern justly, promote a free market economy and invest in its people.

Similarly, Shah said, development investments should be conditioned on countries' efforts to fight corruption and collect more domestic revenue.

USAID has launched four Grand Challenges for Development grant competitions and a Development Innovation Ventures competition fund, designed to focus the world's brightest minds on development's toughest challenges. Young people working at USAID's seven development innovation labs at leading U.S. and international universities are developing innovative solutions to global development challenges.

Shah urges patience when evaluating development. "You will always be able to find a dirt road that's unpaved or a farmer who's not using the latest technology. We know that the arc of progress is not measured by a single success or setback."

"Development is not achieved in a day," he said.

Obama Tells Israelis that Palestinians Deserve Statehood

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 21 March 2013

Washington — In a speech to the Israeli people, President Obama said they are not alone in facing their security concerns, but that peace is the only path to the true security of their country and the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and justice must be recognized.

Speaking March 21 at the Jerusalem International Convention Center, Obama told an audience of primarily young Israelis that their country is "at a crossroads," and they can permanently secure the dream of Israel's founders or face a growing challenge to their country's future.

"Given the demographics west of the Jordan River, the only way for Israel to endure and thrive as a Jewish and democratic state is through the realization of an independent and viable Palestine," he said.

Israelis have built a prosperous nation and established a thriving democracy "in this small strip of land that has been the center of so much of the world's history" while also overcoming relentless threats to their security. Their country "is rooted not just in history and tradition, but also in a simple and profound idea: the idea that people deserve to be free in a land of their own," he said.

But the president urged Israelis to consider the world

through the eyes of Palestinians, and said, "Neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer. Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be a free people in their own land."

He said it is clear that negotiations will ultimately lead to two states for two peoples, with Palestinians recognizing that "Israel will be a Jewish state and that Israelis have the right to insist upon their security," and Israelis recognizing that "continued settlement activity is counterproductive to the cause of peace, and that an independent Palestine must be viable with real borders that have to be drawn."

Obama also said the days of Israel's Arab neighbors condemning the Jewish state "to distract their people from a lack of opportunity or government corruption or mismanagement ... need to be over," and called for them to take steps toward normalizing relations with Israel.

The president said Israelis "live in a neighborhood where many of your neighbors have rejected the right of your nation to exist," and their children "grow up knowing that people they've never met may hate them because of who they are."

For that reason, Israel's security "cannot be taken for granted." But Obama said that "so long as there is a United States of America ... you are not alone."

The president asked audience members to think of ways to build trust with their neighbors, and said young Palestinians, Egyptians and others may "seem a world away," but share the same goals as their counterparts in Israel.

"They want the ability to make their own decisions and to get an education, get a good job, to worship God in their own way, to get married, to raise a family," he said.

Peace begins "not just in the plans of leaders, but in the hearts of people," and they must push their political leaders to get them to take risks.

"You must create the change that you want to see," Obama said. "Ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things."

Obama: "No Shortcut" to Sustainable Mideast Solution

21 March 2013

Washington — President Obama said the United States is "deeply committed" to the creation of an independent Palestinian state and a future where Palestinian rights will be respected, but he urged Palestinian leaders to resume direct negotiations with Israel without preconditions and

for both sides to have the courage and determination to pursue peace.

In remarks with Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah March 21, Obama said the Palestinian people deserve a state of their own that will offer them dignity, security, opportunity and "a future of hope" for their children.

"We seek an independent, a viable and contiguous Palestinian state as the homeland of the Palestinian people, alongside the Jewish state of Israel — two nations enjoying self-determination, security and peace," he said.

But "the only way to achieve that goal is through direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians themselves. There is no shortcut to a sustainable solution," the president said.

There is no point for negotiations if the expectation is that outstanding issues between both sides will be settled ahead of time, he said.

If there are constant negotiations "about what's required to get into talks in the first place, then we're never going to get to the broader issue, which is how do you actually structure a state of Palestine that is a sovereign, contiguous, and provide the Palestinian people dignity, and how do you provide Israel confidence about its security," Obama said.

These "are the core issues," whose resolution will solve other outstanding problems, including Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank, he said.

The president said a successful outcome of talks will require all sides to "think anew" and break away from old habits and old arguments that have been blocking progress.

"We cannot give up on the search for peace, no matter how hard it is," Obama said. "My administration is committed to doing our part" to help close the gap between Israelis and Palestinians.

The president welcomed progress by President Abbas and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in building the institutions of a Palestinian state, and said that as the single largest donor of assistance to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, "the United States is a proud partner in these efforts."

Despite "extremely challenging circumstances," the Palestinian Authority has become "more efficient and more transparent," with new efforts to combat corruption and encourage economic development and entrepreneurship in the West Bank, Obama said.

Along with helping the PA bolster its finances, U.S. assistance will help “strengthen governance, rule of law, economic development, education and health,” Obama said. The United States considers these projects as investments in a future Palestinian state and in peace “which is in all of our interests.”

The president said young Palestinians and Israelis deserve a better future than a life continually defined by conflict, and peace will open new opportunities for both to thrive.

“One of the striking things, one of the ironies of this conflict is that both the Israeli people and the Palestinian people are extremely entrepreneurial. They have a keen business sense. They could be hugely successful in helping to lift up the economy of the region as a whole,” he said.

Obama Challenges Iran to Resolve Nuclear Standoff Diplomatically

20 March 2013

Washington — President Obama said the United States seeks to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, and he urged Iran’s leaders to resolve their dispute with the international community through diplomatic means.

Speaking with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem March 20, Obama said there is still time to resolve the standoff peacefully, but “the question is, will Iranian leadership seize that opportunity? Will they walk through that door?”

The most permanent solution “is ultimately going to be their decision that it is not worth it for them to pursue nuclear weapons,” he said. “If we can get that, that’s good for everybody, including Iran, because it would allow them to break out of the isolation that has hampered their society and their economic development for many years.”

The president said the United States and Israel agree that a nuclear-armed Iran would be “a threat to the region, a threat to the world and potentially an existential threat to Israel.”

He said the United States is committed to Israel’s security, which he said is “non-negotiable” and “a solemn obligation.”

The president said the United States and Israel are beginning discussions to extend U.S. military assistance beyond 2017, as well as to continue funding Israel’s anti-missile Iron Dome system.

“These are further reminders that we will help to preserve Israel’s qualitative military edge so that Israel can defend

itself by itself against any threat,” he said.

He said a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would allow Israelis to feel a greater sense of security, break out of their current isolation in the region and allow Palestinians to “feel a sense that they too are masters of their own fate.”

Obama said he had come to the region to listen to Israeli and Palestinian leaders to get a sense of how they see a peace process moving forward.

In his remarks with Israeli President Shimon Peres, Obama said despite the difficult realities of their lives, the dreams of Israeli children are much the same as those of children all over the world.

“They want to be safe. They want to be free from rockets that hit their homes or their schools. They want a world where science and technology is created to build and not destroy. They want to live in peace, free from terror and threats that are so often directed at the Israeli people. That’s the future that they deserve,” he said.

Upon his arrival in Israel, Obama said it is “no accident” that Israel is the first stop on his first foreign trip since being re-elected.

“Across this region, the winds of change bring both promise and peril. So I see this visit as an opportunity to reaffirm the unbreakable bonds between our nations, to restate America’s unwavering commitment to Israel’s security, and to speak directly to the people of Israel and to your neighbors,” he said.

Trade with Emerging Markets Benefits U.S., Study Says

20 March 2013

Washington — Rapid economic growth in emerging economies benefits the U.S. economy by expanding markets for U.S. exports and providing U.S. producers and consumers with cheaper and more varied goods, according to a new study.

The study, *Rising Tide: Is Growth in Emerging Economies Good for the United States?*, published March 20 by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, challenges the view held by some U.S. economists and part of the general public that trade with China and other emerging market countries is responsible for U.S. economic ills, including the declining number of manufacturing jobs and wage inequality.

Robert Lawrence, who co-authored the study with Lawrence Edwards, said job losses and related dislocations of people and communities caused by trade

are “a myth.”

Over 2002–2011, less than 3 percent of U.S. job losses were due to imports, the study says. All developed countries, including those with large trade surpluses, have experienced job losses in their manufacturing sectors in the last four decades, mostly due to the advance of information and other modern technologies, the related rise in productivity, and a shift in consumer demand away from goods to services, the study says.

In reality, the study says, growth in emerging market countries creates more opportunities for U.S. exporters and provides U.S. producers and consumers with access to cheaper and more varied inputs and consumer goods. Companies from emerging market countries, the study says, rarely compete directly with U.S. companies in export markets because the two groups have specialized in different products and processes, and U.S. producers tend to export more advanced goods than their competitors from China, Brazil or India. The study estimates the U.S. gains from trade with emerging economies at \$500 per person, of which about half is due to trade with China.

At the study’s presentation, Lawrence said he and Edwards don’t play down short-term disruptions in the U.S. labor market caused by trade. They also acknowledged that erasing the U.S. trade deficit would help create some jobs in the United States. But this would not counter the general trends that cause disruptions in the U.S. labor markets. So U.S. trade and investment strategies that encourage growth in emerging market economies will continue to benefit the United States and its trading and investment partners for the foreseeable future, the study concludes.

More information is available [on the Peterson Institute website](#).

U.S. Increases Nonlethal Aid to Syria’s Opposition

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 20 March 2013

Washington — The United States is providing humanitarian and nonlethal assistance to Syria’s opposition so it can provide vital services to people in need and lay a foundation for a free Syria with an inclusive and effective civilian leadership, U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford said.

Testifying March 20 before the U.S. House of Representatives’ Foreign Affairs Committee, Ford said, “Preserving Syria’s national unity and laying the foundation for a free Syria that respects the rights of all its citizens is essential if we are to secure a Syria that helps, rather than threatens, stability in the heart of the Middle East.”

He said this week marks two years since the start of the Syrian civil conflict that has claimed more than 70,000 Syrian lives and has driven more than 1 million people out of Syria to seek refuge in another country. That number could increase threefold by the end of 2013, he said.

Ford said that since December 2012, the United States has recognized the Syrian Opposition Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people both inside and outside Syria and that the coalition is committed to a democratic Syria free from conflict.

He said that on February 28, Secretary of State John Kerry announced an additional \$60 million in nonlethal support so the coalition can have greater impact at the national and local levels and tie into efforts by local groups inside Syria.

In addition, the State Department will create a small grants program the coalition can use to help local councils deliver food, water and electricity to citizens, Ford said. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) will complement that program by providing short-term aid including fuel, heaters, nutritional food and education supplies for children. Longer-term, USAID will support projects like school, power and sanitation system repair, and bring in technical experts to design and help manage those projects, Ford testified.

The United States also wants to provide training and nonlethal equipment to civilian police so they can better protect citizens, he said.

Previously, the United States provided \$54 million in nonlethal aid that included communications gear and training for local leaders. “This is critical to preventing a security vacuum in liberated areas that will be exploited by extremists if we do not help stand up civilian police,” Ford said.

So far, the humanitarian assistance from the United States amounts to nearly \$385 million and is being spent on emergency medical care and supplies, food, sanitation, blankets and shelter, Ford said. USAID Assistant Administrator Nancy Lindborg added that the United States is the largest donor of emergency food assistance for people affected by conflict, including those who have fled to neighboring countries.

She said key challenges to delivering humanitarian aid are constrained access, especially in Syria’s northern provinces, and the safety of humanitarian workers delivering aid. She said USAID wants U.S. aid to be branded as being from the United States to safely let the Syrian people know that the United States “is the largest, proactive provider of humanitarian assistance.”

Ford said the United States continues to believe that political transition is the best solution to the crisis and that it supports the Geneva Communiqué calling for a transitional governing body with full executive powers formed on the basis of mutual consent. "Bashar al-Assad long ago lost his credibility," he said.

"As Secretary Kerry said in Rome," Ford said, "this is a complicated challenge, but the principle that guides us is simple: No nation should live in fear of its leaders and all people deserve the freedom and opportunity to live in peace, dignity and justice."

Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration Anne Richard also testified before the committee. Citing United Nations estimates that more than 12.5 million Syrians are displaced, Richard said, "The State Department's overall goal, of course, is a return of peace and stability to Syria and to one day see the refugees return home."

U.S. Taking "Bold Steps" to Expand Trade in 2013

By Phillip Kurata | Staff Writer | 19 March 2013

Washington — The Obama administration is taking "bold steps" to expand U.S. trade after U.S. exports scored record highs in 2012.

"Last year, U.S. exports overcame slackening global demand and a devastating drought to reach record highs," acting U.S. Trade Representative Demetrios Marantis said before the Senate Finance Committee March 19. "President Obama's trade agenda for 2013 calls for continued progress and bold steps. It will support greater economic growth and jobs for more Americans."

Marantis said the administration is counting on strong support from both parties in Congress to hold its trading partners "accountable for their commitments."

"We intend to enforce our trade agreements to preserve and support additional U.S. jobs. And we intend to reflect and uphold American values in trade policy," he said. He added that since President Obama took office in 2009, manufacturing exports are up 47 percent, agricultural exports up 44 percent and service exports up 24 percent. Increased U.S. exports have supported 1.3 million additional U.S. jobs during that time frame, he added.

The acting trade representative said the administration looks forward to working with Congress to renew the trade promotion authority that streamlines the negotiating process. The authority authorizes the president to negotiate trade agreements that Congress can approve or disapprove but cannot amend or filibuster. The previous authority expired in 2007.

Marantis said the administration is negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a "next-generation, high-standard trade agreement in the world's fastest-growing region." Eleven countries bordering the Pacific Ocean are engaged in the talks, which aim for an agreement on comprehensive market access for goods, services, trade and investment. The U.S. negotiators are pressing for a completion of the negotiations by the end of 2014.

Marantis said the United States is preparing to start trade negotiations with the European Union to strengthen what already is the world's largest trading relationship. In addition, the United States is working at the World Trade Organization and other venues to liberalize trade, he said.

The ranking senators from both parties on the Senate Finance Committee praised free-trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea that Congress passed in 2012 and expressed support for trade expansion in 2013.

"We must now be aggressive, seize these opportunities," said the Finance Committee chairman, Max Baucus, a Democrat. "An aggressive trade agenda is key to boosting our nation's economy and creating good-paying jobs ... all across America."

"International trade is critical to our economy. Trade supports more than 38 million jobs in the United States," said Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican. "We need an aggressive trade policy and the tools to help put that policy in place."

He said he hopes the current session of Congress can enact trade legislation on a scale similar to that of the previous session, which resulted in seven trade bills and legislation to grant permanent normal trade relations with Russia while holding Russia accountable for its actions.

U.S. Urges Donors to Fulfill Aid Pledges for Syria

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 19 March 2013

Washington — The United States is urging other donor countries to quickly honor their pledges to fund lifesaving assistance to more than 1 million Syrian refugees, says Anne Richard, assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration.

"We are facing a resource crisis," Richard told a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee, with no end to violence in Syria in sight. Even if Syria's current regime falls soon, "displacement and the need for humanitarian aid will continue," she testified March 19. She said that even if refugees are not able to return to their homes in Syria for years, host countries will need to continue to help Syrian children in schools and help Syrian families with medical and other public services.

So far, the United Nations Regional Response Plan for Syria has received just 21 percent of the funds it needs to operate in 2013, Richard said. Donors pledged \$1.5 billion in funding for Syrian humanitarian aid at an international donors conference hosted by the Emir of Kuwait in January.

The United States is the largest donor of emergency assistance for those affected by violence in Syria, USAID Assistant Administrator Nancy Lindborg told the subcommittee. So far, she said, the United States has contributed \$385 million in emergency assistance including food, shelters, medical care, psychological support and protection services to Syrians living inside Syria and in neighboring countries. The assistance also helps Palestinians who lived in Syria before the start of the conflict. U.S. funds are administered by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"The United States is fully committed to standing with and supporting the Syrian people," she said. She said U.S. funding "is not just a pledge; it is being put to work on the ground every day, in some of the areas affected by the worst violence, including Idlib, Aleppo and Dar'a."

Lindborg said U.S. assistance has provided a "lifeline" to more than 2.4 million people in Syria since the violence began more than two years ago.

Lindborg said the United States works through "all channels" to ensure that U.S. assistance reaches people in all 14 of Syria's governorates. Those channels include U.N. agencies, international organizations and local Syrian networks— "humanitarians who risk their lives daily to provide aid inside Syria, including the generous and brave Syrians who are sheltering family and helping those in their communities every day." About 60 percent of U.S. aid reaches people located in contested and opposition-held areas, she said.

USAID support for the U.N. World Food Programme provides monthly food rations to nearly 1.5 million people in Syria and another 300,000 refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. USAID medical support includes essential supplies and drugs, trauma training for doctors, and aid to hospitals and mobile clinics.

U.S. support includes blankets, heaters, clean water, sanitation and warm clothes, Lindborg said.

Richard said the United States, in addition to coordinating its response with other donor nations and the U.N., is deepening its coordination with the Syrian Opposition Coalition's Assistance Coordination unit and is encouraging U.N. agencies and other partners to do the

same.

Lindborg said key challenges remain. The United States and its international partners need greater access across borders so they can reach vulnerable groups of Syrians. They also need more security to protect humanitarian aid workers and recipients, she said.

Testifying before the subcommittee, Tom Malinowski of the advocacy group Human Rights Watch said the United States should give more aid to private relief groups that provide cross-border assistance and press the U.N. General Assembly to authorize U.N. agencies to provide cross-border aid to opposition-held areas.

Lindborg said it is important to continue giving aid. "Without our continued, full-fledged humanitarian response, the Syrian people may not have the opportunity to realize their democratic aspirations and see their struggle through," she said. "We must also continue to support the governments and people of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt and other nations who are so generously hosting refugees fleeing Syria to help ensure these nations can maintain open borders."

U.S. Senator Cites Unmistakable Signs of Progress in Afghanistan

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer | 19 March 2013

Washington — Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin says it is important for the United States and its allies to be realistic about the challenges in Afghanistan, but it's also important to recognize the advances that have been made.

Levin told a Washington meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations March 18 that it is imperative for the United States to reinforce actions that promote success. "The first is to continue working hard to establish a durable partnership that will provide Afghanistan's security forces the assistance they need," Levin said.

"The security picture has changed very much for the better. There are unmistakable signs of progress on the single most important security task we face in Afghanistan: building Afghan security forces capable of securing their own nation," Levin said.

Afghan security forces will continue to require support in logistics, transportation, intelligence and other areas, but they have shown they are capable of "carrying the fight to the Taliban, and are doing so effectively," he said.

The civil society the Afghan security forces are defending is better off today than when operations began in late 2001, Levin said, citing these measures of progress:

- Under the Taliban regime, about 800,000 Afghan

children attended school, and girls were largely denied an education. Now more than 8 million students attend Afghan schools, and more than 40 percent of them are girls.

- In 2001, Afghanistan had 20,000 teachers, all male; today there are 200,000 teachers, including 60,000 women.
- The number of schools has grown from 3,400 in 2001 to more than 16,000 today.
- Afghanistan's per capita gross domestic product has grown fourfold since 2001.
- Afghan life expectancy has risen by 20 years since 2001.
- More than 18 million Afghans have telephone access, compared to about 1 million in 2002.

Levin said more effort should focus on bolstering achievements in building Afghanistan's human capital.

"More than two-thirds of Afghans are under 25 years of age, and the country's future depends on opportunities for them," he told the council.

"One promising venue for those efforts is the National Solidarity Program, which has already financed over 68,000 small-scale, locally sustainable projects that Afghan villages select, oversee and protect from Taliban interference," he said.

He noted that just talking about these goals is another indication of how far Afghanistan has come despite the challenges.

Levin cited one other example of the progress being made by the Afghans: In February, members of the Afghan National Youth Orchestra performed a selection of traditional Afghan music, once forbidden by the Taliban, for members of the U.S. Senate and staff gathered in the U.S. Capitol building.

After the performance, the senators took the orchestra on a tour of the Capitol. The orchestra was in the United States for a short tour that concluded at Carnegie Hall in New York.

"Such an evening would have been unimaginable before our partnership with the Afghan people," Levin said. "Not only were there no musical academies under the Taliban, there was no music."

State's Pyatt Praises OSCE Support for Afghanistan, Central Asia

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer | 19 March 2013

Washington — The United States commends the Vienna-based Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's help in advancing cooperation and open talks between Central Asian nations and Afghanistan, a senior

U.S. diplomat says.

"It is an essential principle of the OSCE that shared challenges from security to economic growth require a cooperative, multilateral response. Achieving a stable and prosperous future for Afghanistan is no exception," says Geoffrey Pyatt, principal deputy assistant secretary of state for south and central Asian affairs.

Afghanistan is undergoing three defining transitions: a major security transition, a political transition that includes elections next April, and an economic transition, Pyatt said. "The outcome of the economic transition will depend significantly on Afghanistan's ability, with the support of the international community, to leverage opportunities for cross-border commerce and people-to-people exchange."

Afghanistan's neighbors from Central to South Asia have begun demonstrating support and offering leadership through a range of initiatives designed to advance security and economic cooperation.

Pyatt, who addressed regional economic integration in South and Central Asia at the OSCE March 12, said that under the Istanbul Process, for example, India chairs a working group focused on expanding cross-border commercial and business-to-business relations. And he cited Turkmenistan's chairmanship of a critical transport, energy and communications infrastructure working group as another example of how the regional states are driving cooperation.

"In October, Central Asian governments, plus Afghanistan, participated in the U.S. Trade Representative's Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement Council meetings, to explore ways to further promote regional trade and cooperation," Pyatt said.

The OSCE "is well positioned to support and advance these regional interactions" in two ways: as a convener of governments and as a facilitator for the private sector, including the business communities and civil society, Pyatt said.

Illustrating the OSCE's institutional role is the Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, where the OSCE since 2009 has provided specialized training for border, customs and security officers across Central Asia, the wider OSCE region and Afghanistan. "Although they speak different languages, the students there form teams that grapple with complex concepts and use the lessons learned to develop solutions to real-life border management challenges," Pyatt said.

The OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, is training

the region's next generation of leaders and contributing to the development of a stronger regional identity, Pyatt said.

OSCE programs "have also facilitated legal trade between Afghanistan and Tajikistan by building capacity and developing relationships between Tajik and Afghan entrepreneurs," Pyatt said.

Building these kinds of interconnected networks takes time, but where efforts are made to build on interests that align, the region's future stability and prosperity will be strengthened, he said.

"This idea of regional connectivity as a driver of prosperity is the foundation of our commitment to the New Silk Road vision as an organizing concept for the United States' approach to Central Asia," Pyatt said.

Pyatt said the New Silk Road economic initiative envisions a web of north-south and east-west trade corridors, energy grids and communications networks. He added that new trade routes connecting Europe and the markets of Central and East Asia have received considerable attention.

"Initiatives like the Silk Wind multi-modal trade and transport network from Kazakhstan through Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and eventually Europe will be an enormous boon to regional growth," Pyatt said.

The New Silk Road vision draws its support from a growing number of nations, donors, business and civil society leaders, he added.

Afghanistan's neighbors include some of the fastest-growing economies. "With their growing energy, mineral and market-access requirements, these regional mega-economies can fuel Afghanistan's continued economic growth while increasing stability and driving private-sector investment, job growth and public revenue for decades to come," Pyatt said.

Examples of the means to accelerate regional trade are the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, which the United States provides technical assistance for, and the Cross-Border Transport Agreement between Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Pyatt said these transit agreements can expand and advance trade.

Qatar, Michigan Working Together to Document Arab Opinion

15 March 2013

Washington — The University of Michigan's (U-M) Institute of Social Research and a related institute at Qatar University (Q-U) are entering the sixth year as partners in

what they say is "among the very best research centers of its kind in the entire Arab region."

Qatar University launched the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) five years ago to expand its social science studies. Q-U sought a partner in that endeavor, and U-M stepped into the role through its Institute for Social Research, a large and respected center in this field of study.

The two partners created a social science research center during a period when the Arab region has undergone significant political and social upheaval and the need for solid data on public opinion has been keen.

"It's important to know what people think and value," said Mark Tessler, a U-M political science professor who helped establish SESRI. "We believe that policymakers and officials will be more responsive if information about what the public wants and thinks is available."

Since work began in 2009, the institute has conducted about 30 national and regional surveys, mainly focusing on Qatari citizens and the nation's large expatriate population. SESRI also conducts an annual omnibus survey, seeking opinion on key issues.

"Our research interests span all issues of importance to Qatari society," said SESRI Director Darwish Alemadi, "including labor and employment, modernization and shifts in social values, education, health, family structure, and media impact."

In the 2012 survey of Qatari opinion, 77 percent of citizens called democratic government important for a country; while majorities of both male and female survey participants agreed that men and women should have equal status in society.

The Obama administration has made promoting gender equality a top priority, stating in the United States National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security that "countries are more peaceful and prosperous when women are accorded full and equal rights and opportunity."

ISR Associate Director David Howell said SESRI demonstrates Qatar's intent to move into the future.

"They're creating a knowledge economy," he said. "They are reinvesting [oil resources profits] to understand their society better and make it a better place for the people who live there. I think that's impressive."

The discovery of oil resources in the early 20th century allowed Qatar to transform itself from a poor British protectorate to a wealthy independent country. Its citizens

enjoy the highest per capita income in the world and the lowest level of unemployment. The government is investing in education and economic and diversity and will host the World Cup in 2022.

(This is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov>)