I want to begin by saying that I am not an expert on Afghanistan. I have never been to Afghanistan. Therefore I urge the audience to weigh the words and opinions of General Hillier, Mr. Manley, and others who have studied it more closely, more heavily when they weigh my words.

My appreciation of Afghanistan goes back to the late ‘70s when the Carter Administration made the decision, not to put pressure on Pakistan to reverse its move towards a nuclear weapon, but instead to ask for their involvement and help in providing weapons and equipment to the Taliban and others fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan.

When I returned to government in the Clinton Administration, I learned of efforts to remove those weapons from Afghanistan, because they provided a source of instability in the region. Fortunately, some of the more dangerous weapons were removed from the region. But, it is humbling to realize that both in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States moved from providing military support to military intervention in the space of a bit more than ten years.

Today, I have the greatest respect for the military forces of the United States, of Canada, of our NATO allies who are trying to make progress in a very dangerous region. There are on the order of 50,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan. As I understand it, these international forces have suffered about 1,000 killed in action in combat, of which I suspect the Canadians probably number around 100. So we should appreciate that we are dealing with people's lives here, not just abstract political objectives.

We should start by asking what we are trying to accomplish by our presence in Afghanistan? Every six months the Department of Defense is required to submit to the Congress a statement about how we are doing in Afghanistan, and they properly begin with a statement of objectives for the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. I would like to read it to you:

“The United States is committed to helping Afghanistan recover from decades of strife and preventing it from every becoming a safe haven for terrorists. Our strategic goals remain that Afghanistan is one, a reliable and stable ally in the war of terror; two, moderate and democratic with a thriving private sector economy; and three, capable of governing its territory and borders; four respectful of the rights of all of its citizens.
These are our announced objectives for the United States presence in Afghanistan. I draw your attention to the fact these objectives are wildly broader than the initial objective that the United States had in Afghanistan. The original objective was to enter Afghanistan, apprehend Osama bin Laden, destroy the Al Qaeda presence, and punish the Taliban for having extended sanctuary to Al-Qaeda. The initial objective was very much a focused, tactical mission.

Now let us contrast the statement of our objectives in Afghanistan with what the Taliban objectives might be. I might point out the Taliban don't read The New York Times, they don't have latte in the morning. The Taliban have a very simple objective: Get the foreigners out of Afghanistan, and, thank you very much, we are not interested in the vision of Jeffersonian Democracy that is being offered to us. This is what I claim the Taliban, which is 42 percent of the population, basically, have as their objective.

Now someone may object that my statement of the Taliban objective is not quite right. Surveys of what the Afghan people think, give a different picture, and that is true. The surveys do show a much more nuanced picture of the aspirations of the Afghan people. I believe it is important to do such surveys and consider the findings. I am not so sure that it is important to believe the findings.

The central point I believe is that at heart, the majority of the Afghan people do not want to participate in the modern world in the way that we suggest is desirable for peace, prosperity, and participation in a political system. Regardless of what we say, the Afghan people are living their lives in a different way, and it is going to be hard to convince them to move in the direction of our values in a brief period of time. The net result is that the Taliban have an easier objective to accomplish than we do.

Okay, so what about the U.S. objectives? They are not primarily objectives that can be achieved by military forces. Noble and brave military forces and competent generals are not going to accomplish the objectives that I have quoted above without a whole set of additional capabilities, which General Hillier has quietly said we do not possess and cannot launch into the region. Since it is not a military matter, it is wrong to expect our generals and our military forces to be able to accomplish the set of missions that have been laid out.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of the United States has just made a statement quite pessimistic about our progress in Afghanistan. Political progress is extremely slow. General Hillier diplomatically has suggested that we should replace Karzai. I suggest, General, that the appropriate successor to would be Joe Nye. There you have it.

How about security in the area? Security in the area ebbs and flows. There are changes in approach, for example, the recent emphasis is on provincial reconstruction teams. I see little evidence that the security circumstances for the Afghan people are permanently improved, although there may be a little progress in some limited parts of the country.

What about reconstruction efforts: health, rule of law, education, and infrastructure? Progress is
really going to be quite daunting. Consider these numbers. The gross domestic product of Afghanistan is about 8.5 billion dollars per year, at official exchange rates. Now my friends at Harvard tell me there is something called PPP, purchasing power parity, in which case the GDP would be 1.5 trillion dollars, because their main product is opium, if you mark that to the street price of opium as opposed to the wholesale price. Opium runs that country, and it has for a long time. While we have made some progress in reducing opium production, it remains the economic engine of the Afghan economy, and it influences their political, especially their regional political, structure.

In contrast to the nine billion or so dollars Afghan GDP, the United States is spending approximately 40 billion dollars a year supporting its presence in Afghanistan. Thirty billion of that, (these are rough numbers), goes to support our military presence, roughly 40,000 troops. Seven billion goes for security assistance to the Afghan National Force and two billion for economic assistance.

So you see the 40 billion per year is about five times their GDP. There is no prospect for the foreseeable future, by which I mean the future of not only my life, but the lives of the grandsons that General Hillier and I are happy to have. There is no way that the Afghan government and society are going to be able to support and equip an Afghan National Military Force or an Afghan National Police Force of the size needed to assure security in the country. The goals are to have 80,000 troops in the army and 70,000 in the police force. There is no way that the Afghan economy can do that without our support. So the outlook for Afghanistan to have the resources required for just security is very bleak indeed.

I notice that Canada has taken the decision to remain in Afghanistan to 2011, at which time we will have been there for a full decade. Nobody suggests that our task will be done at that time. In fact, General Hillier suggests it might be much longer than that. So here you have the prospect of foreign troops deployed in that country for more than a decade.

What are the effects of having foreign troops on the ground for a decade or longer? I suggest that you must consider that it encourages, rather than reduces, Islamic militancy. I think that you should also consider that the deployment will attract foreign fighters to Afghanistan – the opposite of the original reason of ridding the country of the relatively few foreign Al Qaeda fighters there at the time. In 2001, the Taliban was not particularly anti-U.S., but there was clearly an infection from the Al-Qaeda groups that they had welcomed. But the consequence of the presence of Allied forces in Afghanistan for a decade is not only to encourage Islamic militancy and attract foreign fighters, but, most importantly, to mess up completely any relationship that we have with Pakistan.

Now here let me just associate myself, although he may reject it, with General Hillier. The real interest for the United States and for NATO in the region is Pakistan. Pakistan is the real strategic question in that region. Afghanistan is really a very secondary, I would say to you, issue, and our attention is focused on Afghanistan. We would be doing better in Afghanistan if we were working more closely with Pakistan to
encourage the Taliban to reject foreign groups that intend to conduct international terrorist activity. Rather than helping Pakistan in dealing with Afghanistan, we are, in fact, putting a stick in Pakistan's eye in numerous ways. First, we have a greatly expanded U.S.-Indian collaboration, which has good points and bad points, but from the Pakistani point of view, it has no points, so that is one problem. To say that we are going to try to get an agreement in the Hindu Kush and in Kashmir seems completely unlikely, since we are tilting, if you like, away from Pakistan completely over to India.

Secondly, we have an ambassador of the United States telling us that U.S. troops are making incursions from Afghanistan into Pakistan. There is combat now between some U.S. units and Pakistani units. Most importantly, Graham Allison would urge me to remind you that Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons. That country is going, excuse the expression, south, both literally and figuratively. If we don't do something about Pakistan and forget about Afghanistan, the region is in very deep trouble indeed.

Canada should not consider this an issue about being a good NATO member. NATO has become a kind of a social club and there is kind of a social pressure to become ever more inclusive and more ambitious in our common security objectives. But NATO is not going to be helped, as we have heard from other speakers, by admitting the Ukraine and Georgia, and NATO is not going to be more successful by undertaking impossible nation-building missions in parts of the world distant from Europe. The purpose of involvement in Afghanistan is not to show that we are all good citizens working together in NATO for a common objective.

The question should be, as I stated to you earlier, can we achieve the objectives we seem to have adopted for our mission in Afghanistan? Can we reconstruct this country into a stable ally, which recognizes the rights of its citizens and has the rules of law, and all that sort of thing? Is that the objective we should have or something that takes a more holistic view of the stability of South Asia?

I say to you, one, as currently stated by the United States in its publications and, I believe, equally by NATO, our objectives are not achievable. I say to you they are the wrong objectives. The correct objectives should be much more centered on Pakistan and centered on the stability of Southwest Asia. I do not believe Afghanistan is a military mission, and I do not believe, quite frankly, that, with all of our now depleted wealth the U.S. and its NATO allies should or will put the capability there required to do the long-term economic and political reconstruction of that country that we have announced is our goal.

John Deutch is Institute Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; former director of central intelligence; and former U.S. deputy secretary of defense.