I met with the two Presidential candidates, Dr. Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah. Both Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah are impressive men who have committed to reformist agendas and campaigned throughout the country. Afghanistan is fortunate to have two such capable Presidential candidates.

In the course of my meetings with the two candidates last Sunday and indeed during many meetings over the years, each has told me that he appreciates the support the United States provides their country, and each has pledged that he will sign a bilateral security agreement with the United States as soon as possible after the next President is inaugurated.

This is a particularly sensitive time for Afghanistan, which has not had a peaceful transition of power in the 50 years since Zahir Shah was overthrown in a coup. More than 7 million ballots were cast in the first round of the Presidential election back in April, and more than half were recorded in the runoff election last month. All agree there was an impressive turnout in a country where the Taliban has repeatedly threatened violence against those who vote.

There have been dramatic improvements in Afghanistan over the last decade in the number of schools and universities, in the number of students and teachers—particularly female students and female teachers—in Afghan life expectancy, in average income, and in many other areas. The Afghan Army and the Afghan National Police, who have taken over security responsibility from U.S. and coalition forces, have shown great capability by successfully securing two rounds of elections and repelling a concerted Taliban attack in the Helmand region of the country.

If the ongoing dispute about the outcome of the Afghan Presidential election is not resolved in a fair and credible manner, these achievements would be at risk. The Taliban does not have the ability to defeat the Afghan Army or to take over Afghan cities and population centers. However, if a disputed election were to lead to infighting or to the establishment of parallel governments, the army could be severely weakened and divided, providing new opportunities for the Taliban.

The United States and our coalition allies would be much less likely to provide the continued military and economic assistance that Afghanistan needs if that country’s leaders cannot pull together and resolve their disputes through the existing election process.

The State Department stated on Monday:

The continued support of the United States for Afghanistan requires that Afghanistan remains united and that the result of this election is deemed credible.

Both candidates told me personally on Sunday that they believe a comprehensive audit of the election results is necessary and appropriate and that they will abide by the results of such an audit. They also stated that they understand the outcome of the election will not be final and will not be credible until such an audit has been completed.

The two campaign teams have been working with the United Nations and international experts over the last few days to develop an appropriate audit scope to recommend to the elections commission. I had hoped that an agreement on this review could be announced at the same time that a provisional ballot count was released on Monday. While that did not happen, the head of the Independent Election Commission said the following:

The announcement [of] preliminary results does not mean the winner has been announced. The investigation of votes could have impacts on the final results.

The two campaigns have already agreed on audit triggers that will result in the review of nearly half of the ballots cast, but they have not yet reached full agreement on the measures to be taken. I hope they will be able to do so in the very near future. But this is the bottom line: Whether or not they are able to reach agreement in full, the Electoral Complaints Commission, working with the Independent Election Commission, has a responsibility to decide how many ballots to audit, and they have that responsibility on their own initiative. The Independent Election Commission must then announce a winner.

The path to resolution of the matter is not clear. On the contrary, the Afghan Constitution and election law are very clear. There is no uncertainty about this path. The Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission have the responsibility to proceed on their own to determine how many ballots need to be audited and to conduct an audit with or without the agreement of the candidates. Indeed, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has already called on the election commissions to do just that.

I said to the two candidates on Sunday that the Afghan people and the Afghan security forces have shown great bravery in standing up for their country and that it is now time for the country’s leaders to do the same. It would be truly unfortunate if the great progress made in Afghanistan at the expense of so much Afghan, American, and coalition blood and treasure were to be jeopardized by political infighting and the failure of political leadership.

Mr. President, I yield the floor, and I note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

AFGHANISTAN

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I have just returned from Afghanistan, where