

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement For Hearing On Afghanistan Strategy
December 3, 2009

Chairman Kerry Opening Statement At Hearing With Secretary Clinton, Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen

WASHINGTON, D.C.--Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) delivered the following opening statement at the hearing titled "Afghanistan: Assessing the Road Ahead":

Secretary Gates, Secretary Clinton, Admiral Mullen—we welcome you here today. Thank you for coming to share more details about the President's plan, and for consulting and partnering with Congress on a decision of enormous consequence for our soldiers, our security, and our country. This is a decision the President has made, but ultimately, all of us share responsibility for its consequences.

Given the complexities of our challenge, the seriousness of the sacrifice ahead and the absence of strategy over much of the last eight years, I believe the President exercised important leadership by taking the time he needed to make the right decision, even as political pressure mounted. His words, and your testimony, show that this Administration has confronted tough realities; carefully weighed the options; and arrived at a comprehensive, considered path forward.

I believe the President appropriately narrowed the mission in Afghanistan. What he presented to the American people is not an open-ended nation-building exercise or a nationwide counterinsurgency campaign. Nor should it be.

The President was right to frame our commitment to Afghanistan in the context of all our national priorities, from the drawdown in Iraq to our urgent challenges at home. And he was correct to consider our mission there in terms of our enduring interest in Pakistan. Over the last days I have heard a number of people saying that we are in Afghanistan today because that is the place from which we were attacked. Eight years later, that's simply not good enough. We have largely expelled Al Qaeda from Afghanistan. Today it is the presence of Al Qaeda in Pakistan, its direct ties to and support from the Taliban in Afghanistan and the perils of an unstable, nuclear-armed Pakistan that drive our mission.

What happens in Pakistan, particularly near the Afghan border, will do more to determine the outcome in Afghanistan than any increase in troops or shift in strategy. Congress has provided \$7.5 billion in non-military aid over the next five years to help address the crucial Pakistani dimension of the President's plan. That is a beginning but I believe there is more we can and must do with the Pakistanis, all of which can alleviate the pressure in Afghanistan. And I believe it is important for the Pakistanis to understand that our commitment to them and the region is long term even as troops are reduced in Afghanistan. In fact, the conditions that permit a reduction in American troops in Afghanistan are a benefit to Pakistan.

The President was correct to define success in terms of our ability to empower and transfer responsibility to Afghans as rapidly as possible, while achieving a sufficient level of stability to ensure that we can leave behind an Afghanistan that is not controlled by Al Qaeda or the Taliban.

As I have said before, to each extra family that is asked to send a husband, wife, son or daughter into harm's way, the deployment of a single additional soldier makes all the difference. But a public debate that reduces a difficult mission in a complex region to a simple, headline-ready number of troops does us all a disservice. What will matter most on the ground in Afghanistan is not the number of troops, but what they will do and how they are integrated into a broader civilian and military strategy.

I returned from Afghanistan and Pakistan in October with serious concerns that, even if additional troops are able to clear the enemy and hold an area, even in the limited areas where we operate, unless we are able to

build and transfer leadership to local Afghans—unless the governance and development pieces are in place—we risk squandering these gains time and time again. And right now, our military will tell you that in many places, that capacity simply isn't there.

There are three principal conditions that I still believe must guide the deployment and tasking of additional troops.

First, are there enough reliable Afghan National Army and police forces to partner with American troops—and eventually to take over responsibility for security? The President has recognized the critical importance of speeding up training and mentoring. To date, we have struggled to do so on the scale required, and I look forward to hearing your plans to increase our training capacity and to quickly move Afghan security forces into the center of the fight.

Second, are there local Afghan leaders with whom we can partner? We have to be able to identify and cooperate with tribal, district and provincial leaders who command the authority to help deliver services and restore Afghans' faith in their own government.

Third, is the civilian side ready to follow swiftly with development aid that brings tangible benefits to the local population? The President has outlined a surge in civilian personnel, which will be crucial to locking in our military gains and bringing stability to Afghanistan and I know Secretary Clinton you have been working on that task.

I would hope that just as the exit strategy is based on conditions on the ground, so too should our strategy for escalation be based on conditions on the ground. I continue to believe that, absent an urgent security need, we should not send American troops in to clear places unless we are confident that we have the Afghan partners and resources in place to build on our victories and transfer both security and government functions to legitimate Afghan leaders. Frankly, I am concerned that additional troops will tempt us beyond a narrow and focused mission. And, with 30,000 troops rushing into Afghanistan, I believe we will be challenged to have the civilian and governance capacity in place quickly enough to translate their sacrifice into lasting gains.

Through conversations with the President and Vice President in recent days, and the President's speech, I have been assured that the Administration recognizes the need to meet these conditions. How we answer these challenges will go a long way toward determining our overall prospects for success. I am eager to hear in detail how we intend to do better than we've done on each of these conditions.

Everyone understands that President Karzai's efforts and follow through will be critical to the outcome.

We all understand that our ultimate goal -- the cornerstone of our strategy--is to empower and transfer responsibility to the Afghans. Some are trying to make much of the President's target deadline. I think we learned in Iraq that when our policy is to be in another country with troops "for as long as it takes" our hosts are good at taking as long as they want. The President is correct to set a target date. It will help create a sense of urgency—and for Afghans who chafe at foreign boots on their soil, it sends a message that, while America will remain committed to the Afghan people, we aren't interested in a permanent occupation.

We can all agree that the next eighteen months are crucial to reversing the momentum and laying the groundwork for a stable Afghanistan—one whose police and army can play an ever greater role in securing its citizens; whose government focuses squarely on reclaiming its legitimacy with the Afghan people; where we have the intelligence in place to engage in counterterrorism missions as needed for years to come—a stable Afghanistan that doesn't imperil its neighbors or harbor our enemies.

We should all recognize that, as Americans, we fundamentally share this challenge. The Senate voted unanimously to go to war in Afghanistan. It should humble all of us that today there are simply no easy options. We have no choice but to grapple with the complexities, reach the conclusion that best serves the

American people, and work in partnership with other branches of government. This is how a democracy fights a war.

The President's speech offered a vision of the path forward, but a great many questions remain, including: how, beyond simply adding more resources, the US and Afghan civilian strategy will improve; what balance we will strike between securing population centers and venturing into the Afghan countryside; how we intend to finance this increased commitment; and crucially, how we intend to improve our partnership with Pakistan. We look forward to hearing your answers.

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