

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement For Hearing On Countering The Threat Of Failure In Afghanistan
September 17, 2009

Chairman Kerry Opening Statement At Hearing On Countering The Threat Of Failure In Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, D.C.-- Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) delivered the following opening statement at the hearing titled "Countering the Threat of Failure in Afghanistan":

Yesterday was the first in a series of hearings on Afghanistan being conducted by this Committee. We heard three compelling cases for how America should proceed. The prescriptions ranged from dramatically reducing our footprint to expanding our commitment of troops and money to a level that would basically constitute nation building.

John Nagl, co-author of the military's counterinsurgency manual, argued that victory could require as many as 600,000 more troops— and a commitment of at least five years. The bulk of those troops—up to 400,000— would eventually be Afghan, but U.S. forces would be needed for years as trainers, as combat mentors, and to fill the security gap before the Afghans could take over.

Stephen Biddle argued that the benefits of a stepped-up counterinsurgency campaign outweighed the costs—but that it was a close call. He acknowledged both the need for more troops and the genuine possibility of failure even if we up the ante. In his view, there could be no effective counterterrorism without an effective counterinsurgency and he agreed with Nagl about the need for significant U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan to help prevent the destabilization of Pakistan.

Finally, Rory Stewart challenged key assumptions of the administration's policy. Instead of escalation, he recommended that we maintain a small counter-terrorism capacity to deny a safe haven to Al Qaeda and continue providing development aid on a low-key but long-term basis. He argued that we need not physically block Al Qaeda from returning to Afghanistan—we just have to keep Afghanistan from providing Al Qaeda with conditions of security and operational ease that they couldn't get in Pakistan, Somalia, or elsewhere. He argued that Pakistan would stand or fall on its own, regardless of events across the border.

Listening to those distinguished experts argue their cases -- and listening to the penetrating questions of my colleagues -- it was obvious that there are fundamental disagreements that must be resolved as we debate this important and difficult issue.

Despite the differences, I believe there are some central truths on which we can all agree.

First, we need a winning civilian strategy. I have said repeatedly that we will not force the surrender of the Taliban by military force alone. Therefore, any strategy that lacks a strong civilian component is doomed.

Second, our greatest national priority here is to insure that Afghanistan does not destabilize Pakistan. As we debate how to succeed in Afghanistan, we must evaluate the impact of every decision on our beleaguered allies in Islamabad.

But history tells us that the challenge is not only from the east. Afghanistan shares a 1,300-mile northern border with Central Asian countries that have suffered from instability themselves. Iran and Russia also have vested interests in Afghanistan. Unless we find common ground with them, we will continue competing instead of cooperating.

Third, we need to counter the growing narcotics problem. As we described in a Committee report released last month, senior military and civilian officials believe it will be extremely difficult to defeat the Taliban and establish good government without disrupting Afghanistan's opium trade. Afghanistan supplies more than 90% of the world's heroin and generates about \$3 billion a year in profits – money that helps finance the Taliban and other militant groups.

We must be realistic and pragmatic. Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan is not a *re-construction* project – it is a *construction* project in one of the poorest and most corrupt countries in the world. We have to come up with concrete goals and be clear about what and how much we are prepared to do to achieve them.

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