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STATEMENT OF SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ROBERT GATES SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2009

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee:

Thank you for inviting us to testify today. On Tuesday night, President Obama announced a renewed commitment and more focused strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. I would like to provide an overview of the strategic thinking and context behind his decisions, in particular:

- The nexus among Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Pakistan, and Afghanistan;
- Our objectives and how the President's strategy aims to accomplish them; and
- The military forces required.

WHERE WE STAND

As the president first stated in March, and re-emphasized on Tuesday, the goal of the United States in Afghanistan and Pakistan is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaeda and to prevent its return to both countries. The international military effort to stabilize Afghanistan is necessary to achieve this overarching goal. Defeating Al Qaeda and enhancing Afghan security are mutually reinforcing missions. They cannot be un-tethered from one another, as much as we might wish that to be the case.

While Al Qaeda is under great pressure now and dependent on the Taliban and other extremist groups for sustainment, the success of the Taliban would vastly strengthen Al Qaeda's message to the Muslim world: that violent extremists are on the winning side of history. Put simply, the Taliban and Al Qaeda have become symbiotic, each benefiting from the success and mythology of the other. Al Qaeda leaders have stated this explicitly and repeatedly.

Taliban success in re-taking and holding parts of Afghanistan against the combined forces of multiple, modern armies – the current direction of events – has dramatically strengthened the extremist mythology and popular perceptions of who is winning and who is losing. The lesson of the Taliban's revival for Al Qaeda is that time and will are on their side. That, with a Western defeat, they could regain their strength and achieve a major strategic victory – as long as their senior leadership lives and can continue to inspire and attract followers and funding. Rolling back the Taliban is now necessary, even if not sufficient, to the ultimate defeat of Al Qaeda.

At the same time, one cannot separate the security situation in Afghanistan from the stability of Pakistan – a nuclear-armed nation of 175 million people now also explicitly targeted by Islamic extremists. The two countries, bound by ties of tribe and faith, share a porous border of more than 1,500 miles. Giving extremists breathing room in Pakistan led to the resurgence of the Taliban and more coordinated, sophisticated attacks in Afghanistan. Providing a sanctuary for extremists in southern and eastern Afghanistan would put yet more pressure on a Pakistani government already under attack from groups operating in the border region. Indeed, the Pakistan Taliban, just in the last year or so, has become a real threat to Pakistan's own domestic peace and stability, carrying out – with Al Qaeda's help – escalating bombing attacks throughout the country. It is these attacks, and the Taliban's movement toward Islamabad seven months ago, that largely motivated the current operations by the Pakistani army. And we know the Pakistan Taliban operate in collusion with both the Taliban in Afghanistan and Al Qaeda.

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A related point with regard to Pakistan: Because of American withdrawal from the region in the early 1990s, followed by a severing of military-to-military relations, many Pakistanis are skeptical that the United States is a reliable, long-term strategic partner.

CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE

Failure in Afghanistan would mean a Taliban takeover of much, if not most, of the country and likely a renewed civil war. Taliban-ruled areas could in short order become, once again, a sanctuary for Al Qaeda as well as a staging area for resurgent militant groups on the offensive in Pakistan.

Success in South and Central Asia by Islamic extremists – as was the case twenty years ago – would beget success on other fronts. It would strengthen the Al Qaeda narrative, providing renewed opportunities for recruitment, fund-raising, and more sophisticated operations. Aided by the Internet, many more followers could join their ranks, both in the region and in susceptible populations across the globe.

It is true that Al Qaeda and its followers can plot and execute attacks from a variety of locations – from Munich to London to Denver. But what makes the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan uniquely different from any other location – including Somalia, Yemen, and other possible redoubts – is that this part of the world represents the epicenter of extremist jihadism: the historic place where native and foreign Muslims defeated one superpower and, in their view, caused its collapse at home. For them to be seen to defeat the sole remaining superpower in the same place would have severe consequences for the United States and the world.

Some may say this is similar to the “domino theory” that underpinned and ultimately muddled the thinking behind the U.S. military escalation in Vietnam. The difference, however, is that we have very real – and very recent – history that shows just what can happen in this part of the world when extremists have breathing space, safe havens, and governments complicit with and supportive of their mission. Less than five years after the last Soviet tank crossed the Termez Bridge out of Afghanistan, Islamic militants launched their first attack on the World Trade Center in New York. We cannot afford to make a similar mistake again.

THE WAY AHEAD

A stable security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan – one that is sustainable over the long term by their governments – is vital to our national security. By the same token, the current status quo in Afghanistan – the slow but steady deterioration of the security situation and growing influence of the Taliban – is unacceptable. So too is the status quo ante – a largely ungoverned region controlled by extremists in which the United States had little influence or ability to gain actionable intelligence on the ground.

The president’s new strategic concept aims to reverse the Taliban’s momentum and reduce its strength while providing the time and space necessary for the Afghans to develop enough security and governance capacity to stabilize their own country.

We will focus our resources where the population is most threatened, and align military and civilian efforts accordingly – with six primary objectives:

- Reversing Taliban momentum through sustained military action by the U.S., our allies, and the Afghans;
- Denying the Taliban access to and control of key population and production centers and lines of communications;

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- Disrupting the Taliban outside secured areas and preventing Al Qaeda from regaining sanctuary in Afghanistan;
- Degrading the Taliban to levels manageable by the Afghan National Security Forces;
- Increasing the size and capability of the ANSF and employing other local forces selectively to begin transitioning security responsibility to the Afghan government within 18 months; and
- Selectively building the capacity of the Afghan government, particularly in key ministries.

This approach is not open-ended “nation building.” It is neither necessary nor feasible to create a modern, centralized, Western-style Afghan nation-state – the likes of which has never been seen in that country. Nor does it entail pacifying every village and conducting textbook counterinsurgency from one end of Afghanistan to the other.

It is, instead, a narrower focus tied more tightly to our core goal of disrupting, dismantling and eventually defeating Al Qaeda by building the capacity of the Afghans – capacity that will be measured by observable progress on clear objectives, and not simply by the passage of time.

The essence of our civil-military plan is to clear, hold, build, and transfer. Beginning to transfer security responsibility to the Afghans in summer 2011 is critical – and, in my, view achievable. This transfer will occur district by district, province by province, depending on conditions on the ground. The process will be similar to what we did in Iraq, where international security forces provided “overwatch” – first at the tactical level, then at the strategic level. Even after we transfer security responsibility to the Afghans and draw down our combat forces, the United States will continue to support their development as an important partner for the long haul. We will not repeat the mistakes of 1989, when we abandoned the country only to see it descend into civil war, and then into Taliban hands.

Making this transition possible requires accelerating the development of a significantly larger and more capable Afghan army and police through intensive partnering with ISAF forces, especially in combat. It also means achieving a better balance between national and local forces; increasing Afghan unconventional warfare capabilities; engaging communities to enlist more local security forces to protect their own territory; and bolstering Afghan-led reintegration and reconciliation efforts.

At the strategic level, the president’s plan will achieve a better balance between investments in the central government and sub-national entities. At the national level, the focus will be primarily on reforming essential ministries and pressing for the appointment of competent and honest ministers and governors. At the local and regional level, there will be a shift to work through existing, traditional structures rather than building new ones. In all of these efforts, we must have a committed partner in the Afghan people and government. That is one reason why there will be very clear and definitive timeframes for reviewing our – and their – progress.

ADDITIONAL U.S. FORCES

As the president announced, the United States will commit an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan for an extended surge of 18 to 24 months. These forces – the U.S. contribution to this fight – will be deployed and concentrated in the southern and eastern parts of the country. The first of these forces will begin to arrive in Afghanistan within 2-3 weeks.

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In all, since taking office President Obama has committed nearly 52,000 additional troops to Afghanistan for a total U.S. force of approximately 100,000. We are looking to NATO and our other partners to send a parallel international message of strong resolve. Our Allies must take the lead and focus their resources in the north and west to prevent the insurgency from establishing new footholds. We will seek some five to 7,000 troops from NATO and expect the Allies to share more of the burden in training, equipping, and funding the Afghan National Army and police.

CONCLUSION

Let me offer a few closing thoughts.

It is worth remembering that the security situation in Afghanistan – though serious – does not begin to approach the scale of violence that consumed Iraq and confronted our forces there when I was confirmed as secretary of defense three years ago this week. With all the resources already committed to this campaign – plus those the president has just announced – I believe the pieces are being put in place to make real and measurable progress in Afghanistan over the next 18 to 24 months.

The president believes, as do I, that, in the end, we cannot defeat Al Qaeda and its toxic ideology without improving and stabilizing the security situation in Afghanistan. The president's decision offers the best possibility to decisively change the momentum in Afghanistan, and fundamentally alter the strategic equation in Pakistan and Central Asia – all necessary to protect the United States, our allies, and our vital interests. So, I ask for your full support of this decision to provide both Ambassador Eikenberry and General McChrystal the resources they need to be successful.

This is will take more patience, perseverance, and sacrifice by the United States and our allies. As always, the heaviest burden will fall on the men and women who have volunteered – and in many cases re-volunteered – to serve their country in uniform. I know they will be uppermost in our minds and prayers as we take on this arduous but vitally necessary mission.

Thank you.

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