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General David Petraeus

Opening Statement at the U.S. Senate ISAF Confirmation Hearing



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Mr. Chairman, Senator McCain, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. And thank you for the rapid scheduling of this hearing.

I am, needless to say, humbled and honored to have been nominated by the President to command the NATO International Security Assistance Force and US Forces in Afghanistan, and to have the opportunity, if confirmed, to continue to serve our nation, the NATO Alliance, our non-NATO Coalition partners, and Afghanistan in these new capacities.

At the outset, I want to echo your salute to the extraordinary service of Senator Robert Byrd. With his death, America clearly has lost a great patriot.

I'd like to begin this morning by also saying a few words about General Stan McChrystal, someone I've known and admired for nearly 30 years. General McChrystal devoted his entire professional life to the defense of this nation, and he and his family have made enormous personal sacrifices during his lengthy deployments over the past nine years in particular. His contributions during that time were very significant. I can attest, for example, that the success of the surge in Iraq would not have been possible without General McChrystal's exceptional leadership of our special mission unit forces there. Similarly, the development of the Joint Special Operations Command during his unprecedented tenure commanding JSOC was extraordinary as well.



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Most importantly, of course, he has made enormous contributions in leading the coalition endeavor in Afghanistan over the past year. During that time, he brought impressive vision, energy, and expertise to the effort there. He made a huge contribution to the reorientation of our strategy and was a central figure in our efforts to get the inputs right in Afghanistan -- to build the organizations needed to carry out a comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign, to get the right leaders in charge of those organizations, to develop appropriate plans and concepts, and to deploy the resources necessary to enable the implementation of those plans and concepts. We now see some areas of progress amidst the tough fight ongoing in Afghanistan. Considerable credit for that must go to Stan McChrystal.

As we take stock of the situation in Afghanistan, it is important to remember why we are there. We should never forget that the 9/11 attacks were planned in southern Afghanistan and that the initial training of the attackers was carried out in camps in Afghanistan before the attackers moved on to Germany and then on to U.S. flight schools.

It was, of course, in response to those attacks that a U.S. led coalition entered Afghanistan in late 2001 and defeated Al Qaeda and the Taliban elements that allowed Al Qaeda to establish its headquarters and training camps in Afghanistan. In the subsequent years, however, the extremists were able to regroup, with Al Qaeda establishing new sanctuaries in the tribal areas of Pakistan and the Taliban and its affiliates re-entering Afghanistan in an effort to reestablish the control they once had in much of the country.

In light of those developments, our task in Afghanistan is clear. Indeed, President Obama has explained America's vital national interest there. "We will not," he has stated, "tolerate a safe haven for terrorists who want to destroy Afghan security from within and launch attacks against innocent men, women, and children in our country and around the world."

In short, we cannot allow Al Qaeda or other transnational extremists to once again establish sanctuaries from which they can launch attacks on our homeland or on our allies. Achieving that objective, however, requires that we not only counter the resurgent Taliban elements who allowed such sanctuaries in the past. We must also help our Afghan partners develop their security forces and governance capacity so that they can, over time, take on the tasks of securing their country and seeing to the needs of their people.

The United States is not alone in seeing the task in Afghanistan as a vital national interest. Indeed, 46 countries, including our own, are providing forces to the ISAF coalition, and others, like Japan, provide vital economic assistance. Earlier this year, our NATO allies and other Coalition partners committed well over 9,000 additional troopers to the effort. Approximately 60 percent of those additional forces are currently in place, and when the rest are deployed, they'll bring the number of non-U.S. forces in Afghanistan to over 50,000. That expansion takes place as we are in the final months of deploying the 30,000 additional U.S. troopers, a deployment that is slightly ahead of schedule and that will bring the total number of U.S. service members in Afghanistan to nearly 100,000 by the end of August. Notably, this number will be more than three times the number of U.S. forces on the ground in early 2009.



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Complementing the military buildup has been the tripling of the U.S. civilian structure in Afghanistan, with substantial additional numbers still deploying. This is essential for, as the President has made clear, the campaign in Afghanistan must be a fully integrated civil-military effort, one that includes an unshakeable commitment to teamwork among all elements of the U.S. government, as well as unshakeable commitment to teamwork with members of other NATO and Coalition governments, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, as well as, of course, members of the Afghan government itself. I will seek to contribute to such teamwork and to unity of effort among all participants.

We know, in fact, that we can achieve such unity of effort because we've done it before. During my more than 19 months in command of the Multinational Force-Iraq, I worked very closely with Ambassador Ryan Crocker, members of the US Embassy, the United Nations Special Representative, and representatives of the embassies of key coalition partners. And we all worked closely together with our Iraqi partners. I look forward to working just as closely with Ambassador Karl Eikenberry and the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Ambassador Mark Sedwill, the NATO senior civilian representative, Staffan de Mistura, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (the same position he held in Baghdad), Ambassador Vygaudas Usackas, the EU Special Representative, and most importantly of course, with President Karzai and members of the Afghan Government. Indeed, I've talked in recent days with all of these members of the team, including President Karzai, as well as with Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. We are all firmly united in seeking to forge unity of effort.

As I noted in my testimony before this Committee two weeks ago, I was part of the process that helped formulate the President's strategy for Afghanistan and I support and agree with his new policy. During its development, I offered my forthright military advice, and I have assured the President that I will do the same as we conduct assessments over the course of the months ahead. He, in turn, assured me that he expects and wants me to provide that character of advice.

As I also explained to this Committee two weeks ago, I specifically agreed with the messages of greater commitment and greater urgency that the President expressed in his address at West Point in December when he announced the new policy. As you'll recall, the greater commitment was explained in terms of the additional 30,000 U.S. forces, the tripling of the number of U.S. civilians, and the funding for an additional 100,000 Afghan security force members. The greater urgency was highlighted by the President announcing the intent to begin a process in July 2011 of transitioning tasks to Afghan forces and officials, and of beginning what the President termed a "responsible drawdown" of the US surge forces -- with the pace of both the transition of tasks and the drawdown of forces to be based on conditions on the ground.

It is important to note the President's reminder in recent days that July 2011 will mark the beginning of a process, not the date when the U.S. heads for the exits and turns out the lights.



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As he explained this past Sunday, in fact, “we’ll need to provide assistance to Afghanistan for a long time to come.” Moreover, as President Karzai has recognized, and as a number of allied leaders noted at the recent G-20 Summit, it is going to be a number of years before Afghan forces can truly handle the security tasks in Afghanistan on their own. The commitment to Afghanistan is necessarily, therefore, an enduring one, and neither the Taliban nor Afghan and Pakistani partners should doubt that.

Our efforts in Afghanistan have appropriately focused on protecting the population. This is, needless to say, of considerable importance, for in counterinsurgency operations the human terrain is the decisive terrain. The results in recent months have been notable. Indeed, over the last 12 weeks, the number of innocent civilians killed in the course of military operations has been substantially lower than it was during the same period last year. And I will continue the emphasis on reducing the loss of innocent civilian life to an absolute minimum in the course of military operations.

Focusing on securing the people does not, however, mean that we don’t go after the enemy; in fact, protecting the population inevitably requires killing, capturing, or turning the insurgents. Our forces have been doing that, and we will continue to do that. In fact, our troopers and our Afghan partners have been very much taking the fight to the enemy in recent months. Since the beginning of April alone, more than 130 middle and upper-level Taliban and other extremist element leaders have been killed or captured, and thousands of their rank and file members have been taken off the battlefield. Together with our Afghan partners, we will continue to pursue relentlessly the enemies of the new Afghanistan in the months and years ahead.

On a related note, I want to assure the mothers and fathers of those fighting in Afghanistan that I see it as a moral imperative to bring all assets to bear to protect our men and women in uniform and the Afghan security forces with whom ISAF troopers are fighting shoulder-to-shoulder. Those on the ground must have all the support they need when they are in a tough situation. This is so important that I have discussed it with President Karzai, Afghan Defense Minister Wardak, and Afghan Interior Minister Bismullah Kahn (newly approved yesterday) since my nomination to be COMISAF, and they are in full agreement with me on this. I mention this because I am keenly aware of concerns by some of our troopers on the ground about the application of our rules of engagement and the tactical directive. They should know that I will look very hard at this issue.

Along with you and other members of this Committee, Mr. Chairman, I recognize that enduring success in Afghanistan will require the development of Afghan National Security Forces in sufficient numbers and sufficient quality. This is, of course, hugely important and hugely challenging. Indeed, helping to train and equip host nation forces in the midst of an insurgency is akin to building an advanced aircraft while it is in flight, while it is being designed, and while it is being shot at. There is nothing easy about it.



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But our efforts in this important area have been overhauled in the past year and those efforts are now broadly on track, for the first time, to achieve overall approved growth goals and to improve Afghan security force quality, as well. Indeed, Afghan security force development has been advanced considerably by partnering efforts that were expanded considerably under General McChrystal's command, by the establishment of the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, and by the appointment of LTG Bill Caldwell to command that organization.

Despite the progress in recent months in Afghan security force development, there is considerable work to be done to reduce attrition further and to develop effective leaders, especially with respect to the Afghan National Police. Further progress will take even greater partnering, additional training improvements, fuller manning of the training and mentoring missions, and expanded professional education opportunities and initiatives are being pursued in each of these areas. Recent salary and benefits initiatives are helping to improve recruiting and retention of Afghan security forces. Training capacity has been increased significantly and the density of trainers to trainees has been increased from 1 trainer per 79 trainees to 1 trainer per 30 trainees. And the unprecedented intensity of our teamwork with the Afghan forces is also beginning to show results. Today, Afghan military headquarters typically are co-located with ISAF unit headquarters, sometimes even sharing the same operating centers. And nearly 85 percent of the Afghan National Army is now fully partnered with ISAF forces for operations in the field. In short, ISAF and Afghan forces train together, plan operations together, and fight together.

Furthermore, I should note that Afghan forces are now in the lead in Kabul and in a number of other areas. In such cases, Afghan units are now the "supported" forces, operating with significant assistance from ISAF to be sure, but already shouldering the responsibilities of leadership. An excellent example of this was the recovery operation for the Pamir Airways crash north of Kabul last month. Afghan Border Police found the site. Recovery operations were planned, coordinated, and executed jointly by the Afghan Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior at the Afghan National Military Coordination Center. The recovery operation, at an elevation of more than 12,500 feet, was executed by Afghan helicopter crews and Afghan commandos. Even the media and information issues were handled by Afghan personnel. That case is, to be sure, not the norm throughout Afghanistan; nonetheless, the ANSF are very much in the fight and sacrificing for their country, and nothing reflects this more than the fact that their losses are typically several times ours.

There is no question that levels of violence in Afghanistan have increased significantly over the last several years. Moreover, the Taliban and its affiliates had, until this year, steadily been expanding the areas they control and influence. This year, however, ISAF has achieved progress in several locations. The initial main effort has been in the Central Helmand River Valley. And Afghan, U.S., and UK forces have expanded security there, though, predictably, the enemy has fought back as we have taken away his sanctuaries in the districts of Marjah, Nad-i-Ali, Nawa, Laskhar, and elsewhere. Nothing has been easy in those operations, but six months ago we could not have walked through the market in Marjah as I was able to do with the District Governor there two months ago.



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We are now increasing our focus on Kandahar Province, an area of considerable importance to the Taliban. We're working hard to ensure that our operations there are based on a strong, integrated civil-military and Afghan-international approach to security, governance, and development. So-called shaping operations, including a high tempo of targeted special forces operations, have been ongoing for some months. President Karzai and his ministers have also conducted shura councils and a number of other political initiatives focused on increasing the sense of inclusivity and transparency in the province, elements of the way ahead that are essential and have been stressed by President Karzai.

In the months ahead, we'll see an additional U.S. brigade from the great 101st Airborne Division deploy into the districts around Kandahar City, where it will operate together with an additional Afghan army brigade. We'll see the introduction of additional Afghan police and U.S. military police to secure the city itself, along with other U.S. forces and civilians who will work together with the impressive Canadian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team that has been operating in the city. The combination of all these initiatives is intended to slowly, but surely, establish the foundation of security that can allow the development of viable local political structures, enable the improvement of basic services, and help Afghan leaders and local governance achieve legitimacy and greater support by the Kandaharis.

While relentless pursuit of the Taliban will be critical in Kandahar and elsewhere, we know from Iraq and other counterinsurgency experiences that we cannot kill or capture our way out of an industrial strength insurgency like that in Afghanistan. Clearly, as many insurgents and citizens as possible need to be convinced to become part of the solution rather than a continuing part of the problem. The National Consultative Peace Jirga conducted in Kabul several weeks ago was an important initiative in this arena. And the reintegration policy that President Karzai signed today -- and I talked to him about it on the way here this morning -- will be critical to the effort to convince reconcilable elements of the insurgency to lay down their weapons and support the new Afghanistan. We look forward to working with our Afghan and diplomatic partners in implementing the new policy.

Recent months in Afghanistan have, as you noted Mr. Chairman, seen tough fighting and tough casualties. This was expected. Indeed, as I noted in testimony last year and again earlier this year, the going inevitably gets tougher before it gets easier when a counterinsurgency operation tries to reverse insurgent momentum. My sense is that the tough fighting will continue; indeed, it may get more intense in the next few months. As we take away the enemy's safe havens and reduce the enemy's freedom of action, the insurgents will fight back.

In the face of the tough fighting, however, we must remember that progress is possible in Afghanistan because we have already seen a fair amount of it in a variety of different forms beyond the recent security gains. For example, nearly seven million Afghan children are now in school -- as opposed to less than one million a decade ago under Taliban control. Immunization rates for children have gone up substantially and are now in the 70 to 90 percent range nationwide.



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Cell phones are ubiquitous in a country that had virtually none during the Taliban days, though the Taliban does try to shut down some of those towers at night -- and does it, as well. Kabul is a bustling, busy city, as are Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Jalabad. Roads and bridges and other infrastructure have been repaired or built. Commerce is returning to those parts of Helmand where ISAF and Afghan forces are present. Even in places where governance remains weak, innovative efforts like the Afghan government's National Solidarity Program, supported by American and international civilians as well as by our troopers, have helped enable local shura councils to choose their own development priorities and receive modest cash grants to pursue them.

Enabling further such progress, though, and successfully implementing the President's policy will require that our work in Afghanistan is fully resourced. It is essential for the conduct of this mission, for example, that the supplemental funding measure now before Congress be passed. This committee and the Senate have passed it, and it was heartening to hear Speaker Pelosi's call last week for the House to do the same expeditiously.

Beyond that, as always, I also ask for your continued support for the Commander's Emergency Response Program. CERP-funded projects are often the most responsive and effective means to address a local community's needs; indeed, CERP is often the only tool to address pressing requirements in areas where security is challenged. Our commanders value CERP enormously and they appreciate your appropriating funds for CERP each year.

As I close, I'd like to once again note the extraordinary work being done by our troopers on the ground in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere around the world. Our young men and women truly deserve the recognition they have earned as America's new greatest generation. There is no question that they comprise the finest, most combat-hardened military in our nation's history.

There is also no question that they and their families have made enormous sacrifices since 9/11, in particular. Many of them have deployed on multiple tours to perform difficult missions under challenging circumstances against tough, even barbaric enemies. We cannot, in my view, ever thank our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen enough, though what Americans have done to support those in uniform and our deployed civilians has been truly wonderful. Indeed, nothing has meant more to our troopers and their families than the appreciation of those here at home.

As you noted, Mr. Chairman, my wife, Holly, is here with me today. She is a symbol of the strength and dedication of families around the globe who wait at home for their loved ones while they're engaged in critical work in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. She has hung tough while I've been deployed for over 5 ½ years since 9/11. So have untold other spouses, children, and loved ones as their troopers have deployed and continued to raise their right hands time and time again. Clearly, our families are the unsung heroes of the long campaigns on which we have been embarked over the past decade.



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One of America's greatest Presidents, Teddy Roosevelt, once observed that "Far and away, the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing." There are currently nearly 140,000 coalition troopers and over 235,000 Afghan security force members engaged in hard work very much worth doing in Afghanistan. If I am confirmed by the Senate, it will be a great privilege to soldier with them in that hard work that is so worth doing in that country.

Thank you very much.