

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement For Hearing On Strategy For Afghanistan
September 16, 2009

Chairman Kerry Opening Statement At Hearing On Strategy For Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Senate Foreign Relations Committee today held a hearing to explore the various scenarios for U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) delivered the following opening remarks:

The future course of our mission in Afghanistan has become one of the most important and difficult questions we face. In the weeks ahead, this Committee will hold a series of hearings to study the situation in greater depth and weigh our options going forward. I know that all of my colleagues on the Committee and in Congress take that responsibility seriously, and I look forward to using this venue to ask some tough questions and hopefully uncover some answers together.

Frankly, I am concerned by where we are today in Afghanistan - about the rising number of casualties among our troops and those of our allies, about the deeply flawed presidential voting that took place, about the impunity with which drug traffickers operate, and about the rampant corruption undermining the faith of Afghans in their government and ours.

And most of all, I am concerned because at the very moment when our troops and our allies' troops are sacrificing more and more, our plan, our path and our progress seem to be growing less and less clear.

Nearly all of us agree that it was right to go into Afghanistan. There is no such consensus about what comes next. The eighth anniversary of our presence in Afghanistan approaches at a time of growing doubts about our mission—at home and abroad. I've heard some of my colleagues express their reservations about the size of our military commitment, and our Afghan and NATO partners have expressed their reservations as well.

It is all too easy to see why some are skeptical. We appeared to achieve our key objectives early. We toppled the Taliban and drove out Al Qaeda's leaders. But we didn't drive them very far – only a hundred miles or so across the border into Pakistan. And year after year, while many of us warned that our mission was not just adrift but slipping out of control, the last administration's focus was elsewhere.

Now the window is closing. Today we face a tougher foe, an insurgency that has adapted to our tactics and honed its own deadly methods. Afghans who once welcomed Americans with open arms have now grown suspicious. American and allied populations are suspicious, too. They want a clearer explanation of our goals and our plan. So do I.

Each time I visit Afghanistan, I return with a renewed appreciation for our troops. In Kunar and Zabul, I've seen the Provincial Reconstruction Teams weave their way through the complex web of tribal alliances to empower local governments to deliver basic services to the Afghan people.

What our troops are doing is extraordinary, and extraordinarily difficult. We need to make sure that we give them a strategy worthy of their sacrifice.

President Obama has promised to weigh the recommendations of the top commander in Afghanistan, Lt. General Stanley McChrystal, on whether to commit more troops to the war. We don't know what the answer will be, but we do know that August was the deadliest month on record for U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

We also know that this should not become a partisan issue. Democrats and Republicans alike can best support the President not by acting as a rubber stamp. We can help him best by asking tough questions, just as he is doing, and partnering with the Administration to craft policies that reflect the answers.

Secretary Clinton has committed to testify before us next month, once the President has finalized his strategy—and I know that all of my colleagues welcome the chance to discuss it with her.

So far, the limited debate has focused on absolute numbers – how many U.S. and allied troops are required, how many Afghan soldiers and police do we need to train, how many more billions do we need to invest at a moment of enormous need at home? Of course, no amount of money, no rise in troop levels, and no clever metrics will matter if the mission is ill conceived.

That's why we need to expand the discussion to grapple with fundamental questions, and examine core assumptions. We need to agree on a clear definition of the mission in Afghanistan. We need to decide what is an achievable and acceptable goal for the future shape of Afghanistan. We need to know the size of the footprint that goal demands. We need to weigh the probabilities and cost of getting there.

I believe certain principles must guide our thinking:

First, it will be the Afghans who must ultimately win or lose the struggle with the Taliban. We need to ensure that the Afghan people feel a sense of ownership—not of occupation.

Second, as I warned back in February, we need to recognize that we are in a race against time in Afghanistan. In a region suspicious of foreign troops, an open-ended obligation of large numbers of US troops risks consigning us to the same fate as others who tried to master Afghanistan. No matter how long we remain in Afghanistan, history should teach us that there will be no purely military solution in that country. What's needed instead is a comprehensive strategy, one that emphasizes the need for the right civilian effort as much as for the right military deployment.

We must also understand Afghan realities and recognize the decentralized nature of Afghan society. That requires us to be flexible. Afghanistan is a very diverse place, and we need to understand that what works in Mazar-e Sharif, a predominantly Uzbek city that fought the Taliban tooth and nail in the 1990s, is very different from what works in Kandahar, a Pashtun city that welcomed the Taliban with open arms. It also requires us to be humble about our ability to bring large-scale change to other societies. That was true in Iraq, and it is even more true in Afghanistan. We have to weigh our choices against what is possible.

We also need to consider our mission in Afghanistan in the context of a highly volatile and strategically vital region—where permeable borders are straddled by clans, ethnic groups, and militants—where what happens in one country can have profound implications for the security of its neighbors. The continued stability of Pakistan—a nuclear armed nation in an existential struggle with extremists and insurgents—remains a vital national interest.

We also need to set realistic goals. The purpose of our mission should be to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for Al Qaeda and a destabilizing force in the region, especially Pakistan. I do not believe we are in Afghanistan to create a carbon-copy of American-style democracy, or impose a strong central government in a nation that has never had one. We need to ensure that we not only set realistic goals, but also align them with our chosen strategy. In a week when US commandos killed a top al Qaeda leader in Somalia without a major troop presence, we should be asking ourselves how much counterinsurgency and nation-building are required to meet a more limited set of goals. And whatever approach we decide on, we do need to find a clear set of metrics to measure our progress.

Finally, we need to ask ourselves the question General Petraeus famously asked in 2003, during the invasion of Iraq: “How does this end?”

Supporters and opponents of this war should agree: We need to have this discussion. We have already lost over 830 American troops in Operation Enduring Freedom, and spent over \$200 billion. For the first time, the Pentagon has requested more war funding next year for Afghanistan than for Iraq. In the end, we may well decide to send more troops to Afghanistan, but first a convincing case must be made to the American people that it will make a difference. Unless we can communicate a clear goal and begin to show progress toward achieving it, we risk losing support for our mission not just in Afghanistan, but also here at home.

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