

**Opening Statement of U.S. Senator John McCain
Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee**

**Room SH-216
Hart Senate Office Building
Tuesday, March 3, 2015**

**To receive testimony in review of the Defense Authorization Request
for Fiscal Year 2016 and the Future Years Defense Program.**

(As Prepared for Delivery)

The Committee meets today to receive testimony on the Department of Defense's FY 2016 budget request, the associated future years defense program, and the posture of U.S. Armed Forces. Let me start by thanking each of you for your service to our Nation and to the soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines here at home and in harm's way around the globe, and to their families.

Over just the past six weeks this committee has undertaken a serious and rigorous review of the present global challenges we face, as well as a review of U.S. national security strategy. We have received testimony from some of America's most experienced statesmen and leading strategic thinkers. A unified and alarming assessment has emerged from these national leaders. As former Secretary of State Dr. Kissinger testified on January 29: "The United States has not faced a more diverse and complex array of crises since the end of the Second World War."

Given the accumulating dangers we face, it is notable that the President supported the Department of Defense in requesting a level of defense spending that is roughly \$38 billion above the caps imposed by the Budget Control Act and sequestration, which mandate nearly \$1 trillion in defense cuts over ten years. In light of recent events, I think this approach was more than justified. With each passing year since the BCA was enacted in 2011, and with the United States slashing its defense spending as a result, the world has become more dangerous, and threats to our nation have grown. I don't think that is purely a coincidence.

The President's budget request responds to many critical priorities, particularly addressing cyber and space vulnerabilities, military readiness shortfalls, and essential long-term modernization initiatives. At the same time, the President's request reflects budget-driven policy decisions that would reduce some critical military capabilities—either through the early retirement or cancellation of existing systems, deferred development or procurement of new systems, or withheld funding for proven requirements. This Committee will closely scrutinize these decisions and seek to meet urgent and legitimate military needs where possible.

As for meeting our growing national security requirements, General Dempsey's prepared testimony this afternoon states that the President's request is "at the lower ragged edge of manageable risk" and leaves "no slack, no margin left for error or strategic surprise." I would go

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further: I question whether the Defense Department's current strategy, which was released in January 2012, has not been overtaken by world events, which would suggest the need for new strategic guidance and even more defense spending than the President's request.

Just consider the events of the past year alone: Russia has challenged core principles of the postwar order in Europe, by invading and annexing the territory of another sovereign nation. A terrorist army that has proclaimed its desire to attack America and its allies now controls a vast swath of territory in the heart of the Middle East. Iran continues its pursuit of nuclear weapons while expanding its malign influence across the region. North Korea mounted the most brazen cyberattack ever on our territory. And China has stepped up its coercive behavior in Asia, backed by its rapid military modernization.

The findings of last year's National Defense Panel cast serious doubt on whether our military can fulfill even the current strategy at acceptable risk. This bipartisan group of military commanders and policymakers stated that the defense spending cuts imposed by the BCA and sequestration "constitute a serious strategic misstep." More ominously, the Panel concluded that, "in the extreme, the United States could find itself in a position where it must either abandon an important national interest or enter a conflict for which it is not fully prepared."

Based on its findings, the National Defense Panel recommended unanimously that Congress and the President immediately repeal the BCA and return, *at a minimum*, to the last strategy-driven budget proposed by former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2011. That would mean \$611 billion for the discretionary base budget for the Defense Department in FY 2016. But here, too, I would note that the world has changed significantly since 2011, and this recommendation is more likely a floor, not a ceiling, of what we as a nation should be considering for own defense.

While Senator Reed and I support the National Defense Panel's recommendations, we recognize that \$611 billion for defense is neither realistic in the current political environment, nor is it likely that the Department could responsibly execute this funding in FY 2016. That is why we came together in the Views and Estimates letter that we sent last week to the Budget Committee to propose an objective that, I hope, could be a new basis for bipartisan unity: ending sequestration for defense by allocating \$577 billion in discretionary base budget authority for FY 2016.

I recognize that there are differences of opinion over broader fiscal questions, especially how to approach non-defense discretionary spending. But continuing to live with the unacceptable effects of sequestration is a choice. Sequestration is the law, but Congress makes the laws. We can choose to end the debilitating effects of sequestration, and we must, because at sequestration levels, it is impossible to meet our constitutional responsibility to provide for our national defense.

We look forward to the witness' testimony today and hope that they will cover a broad spectrum of the policy and resource issues the Department confronts. I would also ask our witnesses to share their views on the current situations in Ukraine, and in Syria and Iraq.