

Opening Statement on the Situation in Afghanistan
Chairman John McCain
February 4, 2016

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on the situation in Afghanistan. I am pleased to welcome General John Campbell before this Committee one more time.

General, this Committee is grateful to you for your many years of distinguished service and your leadership of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan at a critical time. We know the many sacrifices you and your family have made, we are proud of the work you have done, and we hope to benefit from your abilities and experience after your service in the Army is complete. You have so much still to offer our nation and its security.

General Campbell: You have presided over important progress in improving the capability and capacity of the Afghan military. You have developed a strong and productive relationship with the Afghan unity government. And when you saw that our hard-won gains were in danger, you spoke up for what was right—that further troop withdrawals should be based on conditions on the ground. Your successor will profit greatly from your leadership and your record of service.

In 2001, U.S. forces went to Afghanistan because that was where, under the sanctuary of the Taliban regime, al-Qaeda planned and trained for the September 11th attacks that killed 3,000 innocent civilians on American soil. Our mission was to ensure that Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven for al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups to attack the United States or our allies and partners. That mission has been successful for fourteen years, but it is far from over.

U.S. forces are carrying out that mission today by performing two critical tasks: counterterrorism and training, advising, and assisting our Afghan partners. Both of these tasks are vital to achieving our strategic goals and protecting our homeland. We are taking the fight to America's enemies in Afghanistan while at the same time building a sustainable Afghan security force that can stand on its own, take on violent extremists, and deny terrorists safe haven in their country.

But I fear that the latest calendar-based withdrawal plan places these missions and, therefore, our nation's security at risk. While President Obama made the right decision to keep 9,800 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, he repeated, yet again, the

strategic folly of setting a timetable for withdrawal that ignores conditions on the ground, discourages our friends, and gives hope to our enemies.

I continue to be disheartened by the perpetual political focus on troop numbers. This discussion should be first about what capabilities we need to protect our national security, and second about the number of troops it takes to enable those capabilities.

The 5,500 U.S. troops that will be left in Afghanistan if this plan goes forward will be adequate for either the counterterrorism mission or the train, advise, and assist mission, but not both. This smaller American force will inevitably be forced to shoulder a higher level of risk to themselves, to their mission, and to the national security of the United States.

The risks to American forces only grow worse as the terrorist threat in Afghanistan intensifies. The Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Haqqani Network continue to threaten our interests in Afghanistan and beyond. Now ISIL has arrived on the battlefield, raising the specter of yet another ISIL safe haven from which it can plan and execute attacks. This complex and expanding terrorist threat is a test both for us, as well as the Afghan military, which must still develop key enabling capabilities, including intelligence, logistics, special forces, air lift, and close air support.

In short, as General Campbell said in his prepared statement, “Afghanistan has not achieved an enduring level of security and stability that justifies a reduction of our support in 2016.” As a result, the conditions on the ground simply do not warrant a further withdrawal of U.S. forces. By now, we should have learned from the precipitous withdrawal from Iraq and the disaster that ensued that wars do not end just because politicians say so.

Many of us are also increasingly concerned that our rules of engagement, as dictated by the authorities the President gives to our commanders on the ground, are making our mission more difficult and increasing the risk to our troops. For example, it is stunning that up until just a few weeks ago, we had to wait for ISIL to attack or threaten our forces in Afghanistan before taking action.

General Campbell has talked about the importance of making the fight against violent extremists like al Qaeda and ISIL an away game. I fear that restrictive authorities dictated by a White House overly-involved in battlefield tactical decisions is inviting a home game, as we saw in Paris and San Bernardino.

To secure Afghanistan and prevent another attack on our homeland requires the right capabilities in the right places, supported by the right number of people with the right authorities. It is time to give our commanders the resources and authorities they need to seize the initiative and force the enemy to react, instead of the other way around.

The world walked away from Afghanistan once before, and it descended into chaos that contributed to the worst terrorist attack ever against our homeland. We cannot afford to repeat that mistake, because the threats we face are real and the stakes are high for the lives of the Afghan people, for the stability of the region, and for the national security of the United States.

President Obama has the opportunity to make decisions now that will empower his successor to do what is necessary to confront the challenges we will face in Afghanistan in 2017 and beyond. I hope he will seize that opportunity.

General Campbell: After your 18 months on the ground in Afghanistan and almost 37 years of distinguished service in the Army, this Committee looks forward to hearing what you believe the United States, our coalition partners, and our Afghan friends need to do differently to put 2016 on a better course than 2015.