

**Opening Statement
Adm. Mike Mullen
House Armed Services Committee
Hearing on Afghanistan Troop Withdrawals
23 June 2011**

Good morning. Mr. Chairman, Representative Smith, distinguished members of this committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the President's decisions regarding the beginning of our drawdown in Afghanistan and our continued transfer of responsibilities to Afghan National Security Forces.

Let me start by saying that I support the President's decisions, as do Generals Mattis and Petraeus. We were given voice in this process. We offered our views -- freely and without hesitation -- and they were heard. As has been the case throughout the development and execution of the Afghanistan strategy, the Commander-in-Chief presided over an inclusive and comprehensive discussion about what to do next.

I am grateful for that. And I can tell you that foremost on everyone's mind throughout the discussion was preserving the success our troops and their civilian counterparts have achieved thus far. We believed back when the strategy was established in December of 2009 that it would be about now, this summer, before we could determine whether or not we had it right -- whether the resources were enough and the counter-insurgency focus was appropriate.

Well, now we know. We did have it right. The strategy is working. Al Qaeda is on their heels, and the Taliban's momentum in the south has been checked. We have made extraordinary progress against the mission we have been assigned, and are, therefore, now in a position to begin a responsible transition out of Afghanistan.

We will, as the President has ordered, withdraw 10,000 American troops by the end of this year and complete the withdrawal of the remaining 23,000 surge troops by the end of next summer. General Petraeus and his successor will be given the flexibility -- inside these deadlines -- to determine the pace of this withdrawal, and the rearrangement of remaining forces inside the country. There is no jumping ship here. Quite the contrary. We will have at our disposal the great bulk of the surge forces through this -- and most of the next -- fighting season.

And I am comfortable that conditions on the ground will dominate -- as they have dominated -- future decisions about our force posture in Afghanistan. Let me be candid, however. No commander ever wants to sacrifice fighting power in the middle of a war. And no decision to demand that sacrifice is ever without risk.

This is particularly true in a counterinsurgency, where success is achieved not solely by technological prowess or conventional superiority, but by the wit and the wisdom of our people as they pursue terrorists and engage the local populace on a daily basis. In a counterinsurgency, firepower is manpower.

I would prefer not to discuss the specifics of the private advice I rendered with respect to these decisions. As I said, I support them. What I can tell you is, the President's decisions are more aggressive and incur more risk than I was originally prepared to accept.

More force for more time is, without doubt, the safer course. But that does not necessarily make it the best course. Only the President, in the end, can really determine the acceptable level of risk we must take. I believe he has done so.

The truth is, we would have run other kinds of risks by keeping more forces in Afghanistan longer. We would have made it easier for the Karzai administration to increase their dependency on us. We would have denied the Afghan Security Forces, who have grown in capability, opportunities to further exercise that capability and to lead. We would have signaled to the enemy and to our regional partners that the Taliban still possessed strength enough to warrant the full measure of our presence. They do not.

We would have also continued to limit our own freedom of action there and in other places around the world. Globally, the President's decisions allow us to reset our forces more quickly, as well as to reduce the not inconsiderable cost of deploying those forces.

In sum, we have earned this opportunity. Though not without risk, it is also not without its rewards. And so, we will take that risk, and we will reap those rewards. The war in Afghanistan will enter a new phase, and we will continue to fight it. And we will continue to need the assistance, persistence and expertise of our allies and partners.

The President said it well last night: huge challenges remain. This is the beginning -- not the end -- of our effort to wind down this war. No one in uniform is under any illusion that there will not be more violence, more casualties, more struggles or more challenges as we continue to accomplish the mission there.

We know that the progress we have made, though considerable, can still be reversed without our constant leadership, the contributions of our partners and regional nations, or a more concerted effort by the Afghan government to address corruption in their ranks and deliver basic goods and services to their people.

But the strategy remains the right one. This transition and the concurrent focus on developing the Afghan National Security Forces was always a part of that strategy. In fact, if you consider the continued growth in the ANSF, the Taliban could well face more combined force -- in terms of manpower -- in 2012 than they did this year, and capable enough if the ANSF has strong leadership and continued outside support.

Going forward, we also know we need to support an Afghan political process that includes reconciliation with Taliban who break with al Qaeda, renounce violence and accept the Afghan constitution. And we know we need to continue building a strategic partnership with Afghanistan -- one based not on military footprint but on mutual friendship. Our troop presence will diminish, as it should, but the partnership between our two nations will and must endure.

That is, ultimately, the way we win in Afghanistan -- not by how much we do, but by how much they do for themselves and for their country. Not by how much our respective soldiers fight, but by how much our statesmen lead.

Thank you. I stand ready to take your questions.