

Opening Statement of Chairman Howard P. “Buck” McKeon

February 27, 2013

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. The House Armed Services Committee meets to receive testimony on the transition in Afghanistan. Today, we have with us Dr. Catherine Dale, General (Retired) Jack Keane, Lieutenant General (Retired) David Barno, and Mr. Anthony Cordesman. Thank you for joining us today and sharing your expertise.

A discussion on our transition from Afghanistan should start with a reminder of why the United States went there in the first place. The most lethal and complex terrorist attack in U.S. history was plotted and perpetrated by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

But after over ten years of war, the American people are understandably war weary. The United States has committed a wealth of resources in the form of both blood and treasure to preserve U.S. vital national security interests and prevent Afghanistan from being used again as a safe haven for terrorists.

The question before us is whether or not we can continue to prevent Afghanistan from being used as such a sanctuary. The NATO mission officially ends December 31, 2014. Although we have not finalized the transition to Afghan security lead, President Obama already has announced the withdrawal of half of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan – approximately 34,000 troops – by this time next year. In the near future, the President likely will order additional troop withdrawals and determine the United States’ post-2014 mission set and military posture in Afghanistan.

In my view, the President is not adequately evaluating the risk associated with rapid and large-scale troop withdrawals – in terms of both local and regional consequences, as well as U.S. vital interests. The President has decided to conduct this significant withdrawal of U.S. troops during the same time period that the Afghan security forces will be in the lead across the entire country for the first time. Moreover, the Administration does not have a discernible plan to reinforce the Afghan security forces if they cannot hold the gains and / or maintain the necessary security across the country. Consequently, the President’s approach is fraught with risk and lacks a comprehensive strategy to ensure the security and sovereignty of Afghanistan – and thereby U.S. interests – over time. Rather, the President’s approach to Afghanistan appears to be “withdraw and hope.”

I am not advocating for a never-ending combat mission in Afghanistan. But the President should make decisions on troop withdrawals within the context of the security conditions on the ground, the capability and capacity of the ANSF, and the required mission sets after December 31, 2014.

We owe nothing less to the victims on 9/11, the U.S. troops and their families who have served and sacrificed, and our sons and daughters who will have to return if we get this wrong. The simple justice that comes from that principled position cannot be overstated.

I look forward to your testimony and insights into the transition and way forward for U.S. policy in Afghanistan.