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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-6035

ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

February 14, 2008

ERIN C. CONATON, STAFF DIRECTOR

The Honorable Robert M. Gates
Secretary of Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Gates:

I am writing to convey my thoughts regarding the current U.S. strategy and level of commitment in Afghanistan. I very much appreciate the testimony that you and Admiral Mullen presented to our committee on Afghanistan on December 11, 2007 and the discussion you provided on this subject at the annual posture hearing last week. The House Armed Services Committee followed up on January 23, 2008 with a hearing featuring three respected experts on Afghanistan, and their testimony confirmed our sense that steps can and should be taken to improve our efforts in building security and stability in that country.

I am encouraged by your decision to send an additional 3,200 Marines to Afghanistan this year to work with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the separate U.S. and Afghan forces operating there. I continue to strongly support your efforts to get NATO countries to better fulfill troop and aid commitments made to Afghanistan. Like you, I remain very disappointed that some countries continue to leave NATO troop requirements, which they have previously affirmed, unfilled and to severely limit the operational usefulness of the forces they do provide with national caveats. I also believe that an additional commitment of U.S. forces will help accelerate progress towards security and demonstrate strong U.S. leadership. I urge you to continue to review force requirements in Afghanistan to ensure that U.S. and NATO efforts there do not suffer from a lack of ready forces.

The situation in Afghanistan, however, is not purely or even primarily a military problem. Your testimony to the committee and your numerous other public remarks reveal your deep understanding of this fact. U.S. efforts in Afghanistan can succeed only with a high degree of coordination between military, political, and economic assistance. High level coordinators, both at the international level and within the U.S. government, can greatly assist in this effort. I

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believe that, in addition, the U.S. command structure in Afghanistan should be modified to better support interagency coordination by establishing a three-star U.S. headquarters in Kabul to lead the U.S. forces that are not part of ISAF, and to closely coordinate with ISAF, the U.S. embassy and other U.S. and international elements in Afghanistan. The current senior American military headquarters in Afghanistan is a two-star led organization, located ninety minutes drive north of Kabul, and focused largely on only one region of Afghanistan, Regional Command East.

In addition to the operational military benefits of coordination and deconfliction of military efforts that such a headquarters would provide, there are numerous projects relating to reconstruction that involve large amounts of Department of Defense (DOD) funding or other DOD resources that merit a higher level of attention and advocacy. For example, the new headquarters could take on critical country-wide DOD-led initiatives such as the aggressive road-building campaign advocated by Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry during his time as commander of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan. This initiative was provided significant military construction funding by Congress, but has yet to show significant results. Road-building provides jobs to those who might otherwise be recruited by the Taliban, and connects isolated towns to the central government, making it harder for them to fall under the Taliban's sway. As Lieutenant General Eikenberry often emphasized, "the Taliban begins where the road ends."

I believe, as you testified, that the effort in Afghanistan is still winnable. However, success is most likely if we fully commit the necessary leadership, strategy and resources to the cause. And our commitment in all these areas must be closely coordinated within and between U.S. government agencies and other international efforts. The success of this mission is critical to the future of Afghanistan, the region, and of the NATO alliance. I deeply appreciate your consideration of my views.

Very truly yours,



IKE SKELTON
Chairman

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