

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT BRIEFING

**WITH ADM. MIKE MULLEN,
CHAIRMAN OF JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF**

**PENTAGON BRIEFING ROOM
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA**

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ADM. MULLEN: Good afternoon. I just have a few comments to start out, and then I'll take your questions.

First, on transition planning -- I know this has been a topic of great interest -- the Joint Staff and I have done a lot of work to prepare for the transition of government. We know historically that crises often arise during such times, and we should be mindful that this is the first transition during war in 40 years. Our focus has remained squarely on first making sure the U.S. military remains ready for any potential contingency and second that we as a staff are ready to respond to the needs of the new team. I'm comfortable that we are meeting these goals.

As I reminded the Joint Staff last week, we serve one boss, the sitting commander in chief, and we'll continue to do that to the best of our ability while working hard to support Secretary Gates to make the transition as smooth as possible.

On another note, I've just released my annual guidance to the Joint Staff. It's available online at jcs.mil. And I believe you all have been provided copies.

My priorities haven't changed. Number one is to continue to secure our interests in the broader Middle East. Number two is to properly reset, revitalize and reconstitute the joint force. And number three is to balance global risk.

I believe it's critical that we continue the good work we've pursued in all these areas last year. I also believe we must remember the conditions around the world have changed. We certainly see that in Iraq, where things are better, and Afghanistan, where things are not.

But there is a whole range of global concerns that we must pay attention to -- the impact of the growing economic crisis on stability and security; continued tensions in Eurasia and Africa; the threat of the spread of weapons of mass destruction, just to name a few -- and the need to get it right for our people and their families.

And that brings me to my final point: just a reminder that November is Wounded Warrior Care Month, a chance to reflect not only on the sacrifices of so many of our troops but also a chance to renew ourselves to doing all we can to take care of them and their families, for the rest of their lives.

Many of the wounds of war they suffer, seen and unseen, will last a lifetime. So should our care. Every month of the year should be Wounded Care Month. With that, I'll take your questions.

Lita.

Q Mr. Chairman, with the Iraqis considering this SOFA as it goes forward, can you tell us your military concerns, regarding a 2011 withdrawal by U.S. troops? Will the Iraqis be ready at that time? Is it too soon?

And sort of secondarily with the Obama administration coming in, are you also developing plans at this point, with the chiefs, for a faster withdrawal, as the president-elect has said he wants to do?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I'm delighted that the process is moving forward in Iraq. And I know that it's been signed. And if it hasn't been, I understand, it will shortly be sent to the Iraqi parliament, the council of representatives, for a vote here in the near future.

It's a very important agreement. It's one that we obviously need, to continue our sustained operations there and have authorities to be there. Probably as important it's an agreement that, I think, signals a relationship with a country that over the long term, we think, is also very important.

With respects to some of the, some of the specifics of it and how those would be implemented, I've actually spent time with General Petraeus and General Odierno on those. And we're all very comfortable that we have what we need.

Conditions continue to improve. And specifically, I mean, we continue to withdraw forces, as you've seen as recently as a couple of weeks ago, when we announced another brigade combat team coming out, ahead of what had previously been announced.

So we're comfortable with that. Clearly moving forward in a measured way, tied to conditions as they continue to evolve, over time, is important. And then, with respect to an -- the incoming administration, certainly I'm very aware of what has been said prior to November 4th. And as we've indicated -- as I've indicated before, we're always taking into consideration plans based on what we understand possibilities might be. And I'd just like to leave any further detailed discussion with respect to that to a later date.

Q But are you saying you're comfortable that the Iraqis will be ready to defend themselves by 2011?

ADM. MULLEN: Clearly, part of the discussions that we've had with respect to that is understanding that we want to make -- we want to assist them to get ready as rapidly as possible. And over the next 36 months, there certainly is a strong possibility that will be the case.

Tom?

Q Admiral, a couple months ago, you called for a strategy review in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

ADM. MULLEN: Right.

Q And since then, there's been movement on a couple of areas. General Cone last week, the top trainer in Afghanistan, talked about them moving forward with trying to work with tribes, maybe provide some tribal members for the security, perhaps on the highways. And the other area is dealing with the Taliban. Hamid Karzai is reaching to Mullah Omar to talk with him.

I'm wondering if you could just address those two areas: tribal engagement and also talking with the Taliban. And also, do you think -- this talk of reconcilable, irreconcilable -- do you consider Mullah Omar a reconcilable?

ADM. MULLEN: The engagement, certainly, with the Taliban is coming from the -- from the Afghanistan government, President Karzai specifically. And I think that it needs to be left -- the specifics of that need to be left with him as he reaches out.

I do believe that in these -- in these insurgencies and the counterinsurgency warfare, there clearly are a group of reconcilables and a group of irreconcilables. And at some point in time, we get to a point in these insurgencies where you peel off the irreconcilables and I think you have -- start having conversations with those who are reconcilable. That's part of the process.

Exactly what the right time to do that is part of how we look we ahead. And at least from my perspective, we're not there yet. But having that be a part of the overall long-term strategy, I think, is very realistic.

Who and when -- it happened clearly in Iraq; it's happened in other counter- or insurgencies historically, and I think it'll happen here as well.

Q And tribal engagement?

ADM. MULLEN: I think the engagement of tribal leaders is very important and -- across the board, with respect to Afghanistan. And I think that's also the case as well in Pakistan, over the long term, in terms of how this challenge that we have, particularly in the -- on the border, is eventually resolved. And so I think having a strategy which includes tribal engagement is a very important part.

You mentioned multiple -- I mean, multiple reviews. And while there is a level of independence of -- in each of those, which I think is healthy, I expect, certainly from my position, to take the outputs of those and integrate them, from my perspective as a chairman, in terms of my recommendation for future strategy with respect to Afghanistan.

Q And quickly, Mullah Omar -- is that a good idea, to reach out to him, as President --

ADM. MULLEN: I'll leave that up to President Karzai.

Q Admiral, what is the U.S. military prepared to do about the supertanker that's been captured by pirates off the African coast?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I think it speaks to the larger challenge that we have, which is piracy in general. What strikes me about this particular supertanker is how far away from Africa it was. As I understand it, it's about 450 miles southeast of Kenya.

What I'm seeing is a reduction in the overall of successful piracy attempts, but certainly we've seen an extraordinary rise in the overall numbers. And there are groups of ships out there. There's a NATO group that has been out there for a couple of weeks now. Certainly we've got a task force that our -- the United States Navy's fleet commander out there is very much aware of, and very focused on with respect to this.

The -- we have the authorities that we need; we have the rules of engagement that we need right now. One of the challenges that we have -- you have in piracy clearly is, if you are intervening and you capture pirates, is

there a path to prosecute them? And that's something I think the international community has got to answer for the long run.

But by and large, there are many more ships out there from many countries, which have, I think, reduced the number of successful engagements. But I am extremely concerned by the overall number and that we're going to continue to have bring pressures on these pirates.

Q Can you tell us what steps might be taken in this particular case?

ADM. MULLEN: I can't right now, other than the -- the details that I've seen is basically that they've -- they have taken the ship, and I'll presume, like other pirates, they will get into some mode of requesting ransom. And that's to be dealt with directly with respect to the Saudi -- Saudi Arabia. And that's how it's proceeded before, and I would expect that would be the case.

Tony?

Q To follow up on that, is there any indication that the pirates have any al Qaeda or Iranian backing, or is this simply a group of traditional pirates? I mean, that was a big target they took on.

ADM. MULLEN: I've -- I have seen nothing specifically with respect to this group of pirates. I have -- certainly the pirate -- the piracy syndicate that I have looked at in the past is pretty well backed financially. I have not seen any connection to al Qaeda or to terrorists per se.

Q Were you stunned or surprised by the attack on this large vessel today versus going after smaller boats?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm stunned by the range of it, less so than I am the size. These are pretty -- they have proven to be pretty capable, can get on and off lots of vessels. I mean, this is a 300,000-ton -- three times bigger one of our aircraft carriers. But once there's an avenue to be able to get up on it, they -- and it's -- typically these ships, even that big, don't have that many -- you know, the crews are not exorbitantly large. So once they have access, they seem to be able to get on and take over, which they've done in this case.

Q When you say range, do you mean range from the land --

ADM. MULLEN: Yeah, 450 miles away from the coast is -- that is the furthest -- that's the longest distance I've seen for any of these incidents. Q Admiral Mullen, obviously any advice you give to the new president will be something that you only share with him, but can you tell us -- has your view changed that any withdrawal of troops from Iraq needs to be based on the conditions on the ground?

ADM. MULLEN: No, I'm in a position that is still conditions-based, and I think it needs to be measured in a -- and it needs to be -- and again, conditions continue to improve in a way where we are allowed to withdraw forces and -- or -- and we've done that very specifically. And as I've said for a significant period of time, you know, I am hopeful that conditions will continue to improve, so we can continue to do that.

But I do think it's important that it -- that it be conditions-based. I certainly understand there are other options. And it's something that we look at all the time. But at the same time, I mean, my -- from a -- from the military's perspective, I think it's best to be conditions-based.

Q And if you get one of those other options, as you call it, can you carry that out?

ADM. MULLEN: Sure. Sure.

Q Admiral, how daunting will it be to -- at least logistically -- to dismantle this U.S. force in Iraq over this period of time? And how do you see that unfolding?

ADM. MULLEN: I think -- at least as I've seen it, it's doable. It's a -- it's a very significant footprint and very sizeable force. But we've been moving in and out of this theater for a long period of time, and we have the capacity and the capability to do it.

So I don't -- I don't think it -- it is -- it is very doable, but it's not the kind of thing that we could do overnight. I think -- I mean, to remove the entire force would be, you know, two to three years, as opposed to something we could do in a very short period of time as we've looked at it thus far. And again, it depends on what direction we're given, with respect to, you know, how quickly we could do it and what the conditions are in which we would do -- I mean, there are a lot of factors associated with this. But it's more than doable.

Q Back on the SOFA, the conditions-based philosophy you subscribe to -- hasn't some of the conditions-based language been taken out of it? And then, as it stands, we do have to be out by 2011, no matter what? Is that true? And are you comfortable with that?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm -- certainly, I understand the dates that are in there and I consider that -- it's my view that the SOFA itself is adequate for what we need right now. And I certainly understand the boundaries and that -- when I was asked the question earlier by Tom about, a couple of months ago, the strategy -- you know, the strategy review was considering these things and yet there's been a couple things that have changed. And so three years is a long

time. Conditions could change in that period of time. And certainly there -- you know, if I -- if we get to a point where this SOFA is agreed to and have a relationship with the government of Iraq tied to it, that we will continue to have discussions with them over time, as conditions continue to evolve.

Q And you can change the agreement, is what you're --

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I mean, clearly that's theoretically possible.

I don't -- I wouldn't -- you know, I would look at that only as conditions warranted down the road. And again that wouldn't be my call. That would be somebody else's.

Q A follow up on that; you said two to three years would be the time frame that, you think, you could safely, effectively remove the entire force.

What are some of the risks in doing it on a shorter scale, say, some arbitrary number like 16 months?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, there's -- well, I think, you know, it gets into specifically what the, what the, what the direction would be.

So we have, you know, we have 150,000 troops in Iraq right now. We have lots of bases. We have an awful lot of equipment that's there. And so we would have to look at all of that, tied to obviously the conditions that are there, literally the security conditions that are there, depending on where we're talking about, as they evolve. And clearly we'd want to be able to do it safely.

So when I talk about that kind of range of time, it really, it is conditioned by what's going on. But that's -- those are, those are numbers, broad numbers if you will, as we've looked at all of what we have in Iraq right now.

Jim.

Actually it was a correct Jim. It was just a different Jim.

Q Do you believe that the Iraqi military will be able to take over its own security by the end of 2011? And is it your understanding, under this proposed agreement, the way it is written now, that all American forces would have to be out by the end of 2011? And what is your understanding about this provision that by June of next year, the American forces withdraw from urban areas?

Is the U.S. military ceding control of the battlefield to the Iraqis? ADM. MULLEN: It is my understanding that the 2011 date is all American forces, yes, out.

With respect to the 2009 date, being out of the cities and villages and towns, in fact in those, in those provinces which have been, which have been PICed, where the Iraqis have taken control for security, we are out of those cities, towns and villages.

So this is consistent with how we have moved, once an area has been turned over to the Iraqis for security.

As we look -- as we look down the road, probably the most -- there are two pieces of this. One is Baghdad -- in other words, turning the security of Baghdad over and that requirement. And that will be a big challenge. And the other that is clearly not secure up north is Mosul. And we continue to be in a - in a pretty tough fight up in Mosul.

So -- but the -- what we have done, as security has been -- has improved and we've turned it over to the Iraqis, we are now moving out of those cities. We have moved out of those cities that have been turned over. And so it would be consistent with that.

Q And what about the idea that the Iraqis would be able to provide for their own security by the end of 2011?

ADM. MULLEN: The Iraqi security forces have improved dramatically in the last couple of years. And I would say over -- if that improvement would continue on the pace that we see right now, that they'd be able to do that.

Jim Garamone?

Q Sir, there's -- thanks a lot. There's been a lot of discussion recently that the 4 percent of GDP for defense is unrealistic. Have you changed your thinking about your proposal on that?

ADM. MULLEN: I actually originated that discussion or tried to start that discussion and focus on it because I think it's very important for the American people and its representation to look very seriously at the investment that we make as a country in defense.

And as I look back historically, it seemed to me that about 4 percent -- including the cost of the war right now, I think we're at about 4.3 percent or so -- that that should -- that should be a floor, given the challenges that we have that I can see from a national security perspective. And that -- clearly, this is a combination of strategic appetite, investment for security, and how -- what

direction we would take with respect to that, in terms of both that appetite and commitments and resources to underpin that.

So I think it really is important that we have the debate. And it's, as I said originally, it's less the number, to me, than it is to -- what I've tried to do is engender the discussion and the debate about this with respect to what we need. And 4 percent again seems about right. I'm not hung up on 4 percent. But think having our national security investment correct, in the times in which we're living, is absolutely critical.

Barbara.

Q Admiral, going back to Iraq, not the SOFA, which is perhaps a three-year withdrawal plan, but the president-elect has laid out a policy that he will pursue, of something more like a 16-month withdrawal from Iraq. You've led troops, for the last several months, on a basis of no mandatory withdrawal timetable; conditions only.

So on the question here of Iraq, how, with no disrespect, sir, how do you begin to support the president-elect's stated policy of a timetable for withdrawal, not the SOFA? How do you support his policy, stated policy of closing Gitmo, when that is something that you have led troops on for the last term of your office?

How do you, just to help people understand, how do you suddenly shift gears and say, okay, that's what my -- that's the strategy I was leading the troops on before; now I'll do this. Can you help people understand that?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, first of all, as I said in my opening comments, I serve the sitting president and certainly will until he turns it over to President-elect Obama. Should President-elect Obama give me direction, I would carry that out. I mean, that's what I do as a senior member of the military.

What has -- what President-elect Obama has also said is that he would seek the counsel of myself and the Joint Chiefs before he made any decisions. And so I look forward to that discussion, look forward to the engagement and certainly want to -- intend to give him, as I do the current, the current president, the best advice I can with respect to, with respect to where he wants to go.

The -- with respect to a decision like Gitmo, I spoke about a year or a year-and-a-half ago that it was my view that, you know, Gitmo should be closed. That's not my lane.

I am the -- I do believe, you know, from -- my requirements are to carry out the mission, which we're doing very well militarily. And then there are

challenges with closing that. And I think that will, that will become more and more evident as the focus on this continues. And certainly the challenges, as President-elect Obama has said that he intends to close it, the challenges that are associated with that will become front and center.

But if that's the direction of the president of the United States, that's obviously where I'll go. And that is much more a policy issue than it is in my lane in particular.

Q Can I follow up?

ADM. MULLEN: Yeah.

Q Very briefly, what are the challenges that you see to closing Gitmo? And on Iraq again, should we interpret your comments that you will, in fact, try to convince him to stay with a conditions-based approach, rather than a timetable?

ADM. MULLEN: I would not pre-state what my discussion with the new president would be, or what I would tell him. I think that is -- that will be determined based on the engagement and the counsel that he seeks, and he has said publicly that he will seek that counsel.

Q And on Gitmo, what are the challenges you see?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I think that those mostly rely well outside my lane. They've been discussed fairly widely, I think, in the press, and I wouldn't say anything more than that.

Q Admiral Mullen, the desire to try to speed up the training of Iraqi security forces, given the agreements and given the need to -- the agreement to get out fast as possible -- the U.S. forces, that is -- what is the U.S. going to do to try to facilitate that increased capability on the ISF's part? Are we looking at more transfer of U.S. troops there down to a training mission? Are we looking - more military training teams being deployed to Iraq, even if the forces continue to draw down and -- writ large?

ADM. MULLEN: We clearly know that this -- the Iraqi security forces being able to provide for their own security is one of the big keys to a successful transition. And we are very -- we're focused on that like a laser. And so it is certainly up to General -- to all of us, but in particular to General Odierno and General Helmick, who is -- Lieutenant General Helmick, who is responsible for the training in Iraq, and to do as much as we can to enhance that.

And I'm very comfortable. That mission has been incredibly well executed. The pace is a good pace, and I think that the pace will more than suffice for what needs to be, in terms of Iraqi security forces taking over totally in their own security in the future. Q So you believe that that's on track to change or to successfully continue to develop through the middle of 2009, and subsequently through the end of 2011?

ADM. MULLEN: I think it's very much on track over the next two to three years.

Q Admiral, there have been a number of -- over a dozen missile strikes from Predators in Pakistan over the last number of months. A, aside from killing people, what impact are they having on the way the terrorist networks are working?

And then secondly, can you tell us how the Pakistani military is working in Bajaur to help the Americans on some of the border issues?

ADM. MULLEN: I don't -- I'm not going to talk about any detailed operations with respect to that, to get to the first part of that.

And I have watched with admiration and -- the Pakistani military, which has moved into Bajaur specifically over the last several months and had a very significant impact there.

General Kayani is -- has a military which has also got a operational tempo challenge, to move his brigades routinely into the FATA. He's essentially executing a plan that he's laid out, and I'm very supportive of that, and encouraged but what -- by what I see as a result.

And some of the results is what we talked -- what I've talked about here historically is we see a fairly significant impact in that area, which is just across from Konar, on the reduction in insurgents' ability to cross that border, to basically camp out there, to have -- on the Pakistan side, to be able to train, to have that safe haven, and move. And that's effectively what we want to see happen, and also to coordinate that with our movements on the Afghan side. So I've seen very positive effects.

A quick follow-up. To what extent are they getting intelligence from you and reacting on the basis of that? Or is it more their own intelligence --

ADM. MULLEN: I wouldn't go any further than to say that we've -- we have liaison officers, and we have had for a long period of time, who continue to exchange information. I'd leave it at that.

Yeah?

Q Admiral, are you seeing on the part of the Taliban either more of a national command and control structure, even rudimentary, allow them to communicate intent in one part of the country and have attacks carried out in another?

And secondarily, are you seeing -- Dave Kilcullen, the counterinsurgency expert, was talking this week about a much greater degree of Taliban local governance in setting up court systems and other -- not militant activity but governance activity. Are you seeing that? And if so, is that a positive factor or a negative one?

ADM. MULLEN: As far as the governance is concerned, I certainly have seen more this year than last year. I'm not -- I couldn't characterize it in terms of its overall scope, but certainly I've seen it discussed this year, where it wasn't even raised as part of the Taliban strategy last year. And I don't consider that -- I mean, the Taliban is the insurgency, and I don't consider their governance to be a positive thing.

And with respect -- and the first part -- sorry --

Q If there's any type of command and control on a national level for the --

ADM. MULLEN: I haven't seen anything specifically, but I certainly wouldn't say I -- I wouldn't or couldn't say that there isn't some level of national C2 that's having an impact on how they're fighting the fight.

Q Admiral, I just want to see if I understand what's been said about the SOFA today, so I'd appreciate a yes or no answer. Does the agreement, as passed by the Iraqi cabinet, require all U.S. troops to leave Iraq by the end of 2011, regardless of conditions on the ground?

ADM. MULLEN: Yes.

Q Sir, about the cross-border airstrikes from Afghanistan to Pakistan, is there a tacit agreement between the United States and Pakistan simply that the U.S. is not going to acknowledge any of those actions?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm not going to talk about any operational details like that.

Q I'll take that as a yes. (Scattered laughter.)

ADM. MULLEN: Okay.

Gordon?

Q Thank you. Just back on piracy, quickly, I'd ask you to expand briefly. Do you see with their change in tactics, the pirates', a greater role for the U.S. military in this area to guard against this activity?

ADM. MULLEN: I certainly see a greater role for the maritime forces, which are by and large out there coalition but certainly include the Navy of the United States, and I do see that. And it's growing. Again the overall number of attacks are growing.

It's got a lot of people's attention and is starting, to have impact on the commercial side which, I know, countries raise as a concern. And so there's a lot more focus on this. It's a very serious issue. It's a growing issue. And we're going to continue to have to deal with this.

Last question.

(Cross talk.)

A last follow-up.

(Laughter, cross talk.)

Q You just said that the current SOFA agreement calls for all U.S. troops to leave by the end of 2011, regardless of conditions.

How is that different than the first draft that was submitted, in terms of language on the withdrawal date?

ADM. MULLEN: There have been an extraordinary number of drafts, as this has been negotiated. So I will tell you, from the military perspective, I'm comfortable that we have an adequate SOFA in terms of what we need, certainly the authorities and protections that I need, from a military perspective.

Short.

Q Could you explain, please, to the public, why a small group of pirates, in small boats, armed with small arms, throwing grappling hooks up onto a ship rail, can seize 14 or 15 large cargo vessels and hold some of the world's most powerful navies at bay for months at a time?

ADM. MULLEN: The -- they're very good at what they do. They're highly, you know, they're very well-armed. Tactically they're very good. And so once they get to a point where they can board, it becomes very difficult to get them

off, because clearly now they hold hostages. And from the standpoint of -- the question then becomes, well, what do you do about the hostages? And that's where the standoff is.

That's a -- that's a national question to ask, based on the flag of vessel. And the countries, by and large, have been paying the ransom that the pirates have asked.

Thank you.

Q Thank you.