

Chairman Ike Skelton Outlines Top Defense Challenges Facing a New Administration

1. We Must Develop a Clear Strategy to Guide National Security Policy

Since World War II, the United States has been “the indispensable nation”, and we stand today as the world’s dominant economic, political, and military power. Our nation’s ability to sustain this leadership role is jeopardized by the absence of a comprehensive strategy to advance U.S. interests. Recent experience has revealed the pitfalls of taking part in world affairs without an underlying strategic framework to guide us. We do our country no favors by squandering our national power, and we must not abdicate our leadership role.

Today, no corner of the globe is too distant to be beyond our interest. Remote places such as the Hindu Kush are home to those who would attack us and our allies. Regional clashes, such as the recent conflict between Georgia and Russia, have serious ramifications for U.S. interests, and potential flashpoints, such as the Taiwan Strait and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict would not respond well to a world leadership vacuum.

The next President must collaborate with Congress and the American people to formulate a new, broadly understood and accepted strategy to advance our national security interests, and the next Quadrennial Defense Review of the Department of Defense must translate this strategy into a clear roadmap for organizing the Department and setting priorities in the next four years.

2. We Must Restore America’s Credibility in the World

The ability to build and sustain international coalitions and alliances will continue to be one of the central requirements of national security policy. The full range of threats to our national security can only be addressed through the consistent and determined efforts of multiple nations working together. The new President will set the tone in how we deal with others, but our government will need to lead in this endeavor.

The Department of Defense has recognized this fact, as shown by Secretary Gates advocating substantial increases in budgets and personnel for the efforts of the Department of State and the Agency for International Development, as well as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen’s concept of a thousand ship navy consisting of a loose coalition of U.S. and allied navies working together to police the world’s oceans. Other parts of DOD have also been focused on developing doctrine and organizational mechanisms for improving coalition operations.

However, the U.S. can only lead and help reinvigorate international institutions if other nations believe we are credible, just, and intend our efforts to serve interests beyond our own. Thus, we must rebuild the credibility and reputation of the United States. Achieving this will require changes in how the United States builds and

maintains international coalitions and deals with international actors whose interests do not always align with ours.

3. We Must Refocus our Efforts on Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating. Violence by the Taliban and al Qaeda is rising, attacks against the coalition are increasing, and safe havens in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region are thriving. The genesis of the 9/11 attack was in Afghanistan and any future attack on our homeland is likely to originate in Afghanistan or in the border region with Pakistan.

Until our country is prepared to lead and act decisively and persistently, it appears the problems in Afghanistan will continue to fester. Our efforts in Iraq have diverted resources and focus away from the war in Afghanistan. We must re-focus our efforts and work with the international community to provide the necessary leadership, strategy and resources to Afghanistan to ensure success of that mission.

4. We Must Responsibly Redeploy from Iraq

The men and women of our Armed Forces have done a magnificent job in Iraq, but we have reached the time when the citizens of both the United States and Iraq agree that it is time for the U.S. military to come home. Our challenge is to manage that redeployment in such a way as to ensure that it reduces further strain on our military without jeopardizing the gains made in Iraq.

While we continue to protect U.S. citizens in Iraq, pursue terrorists, and help train and equip the Iraqi security forces, U.S. combat forces must be freed up to begin the process of resetting, rebuilding, and also refocusing on Afghanistan. The United States will face new challenges to our security and our interests in the future, and we will need the military units that are in Iraq to be returned to their full capability to effectively address them.

5. We Must Improve Our Non-Proliferation Efforts

The risk that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) could fall into terrorist hands is one of the gravest threats facing our country. The 9-11 Commission raised this as a serious concern in its report. Yet a lack of effective policy guidance and leadership, along with program and funding constraints, have limited the progress of U.S. nonproliferation and threat reduction efforts.

There must be a strong national commitment to reinvigorate these programs, in part through increased funding that will strengthen and expand existing programs and enable the development of new projects. We must do whatever we can to secure WMD and vulnerable WMD-usable material around the world, and to reduce the risk that such dangerous weapons and material could fall into terrorist hands.

6. We Must Ensure a High State of Readiness for Our Forces

Our troops have been engaged in combat operations for nearly seven years, and it has strained our military to the breaking point. The toll of repeated deployments has worn out our troops and equipment and left us ill-prepared to respond to any future crises that may arise. Shortfalls of personnel, equipment and training are affecting all of our services, but the ground forces are showing the most serious strain. The cost to reset the equipment for our ground forces alone could easily exceed \$100 billion. We must focus our resources to find the right balance between near term needs and the long term health of our military to minimize the strategic risk now facing this country.

Restoring readiness will take a significant investment of time and money, but it must be done if we are to expect our military to respond ably when we need them. We are already at risk. Either we fix our readiness problems immediately or else risk emboldening those who would seek to do us harm.

7. We Must Recruit and Retain a High-Quality Force

Our forces are the most highly-trained and educated in the world. The dedication and professionalism of those who serve are unsurpassed. However, there are serious challenges that must be faced if we are to maintain the quality of the force we have today.

While the cost for the services to recruit and retain its people has skyrocketed from \$4.6 billion in Fiscal Year 2005 to \$7.1 billion in Fiscal Year 2007, funding is not the only issue that will impact future recruitment and retention. The propensity of Americans to serve in uniform is significantly declining. While some decline can be attributable to the current conflicts, the number of young men and women exposed to the military experience is extremely small.

Additionally, the greatest future challenge we will face is finding qualified men and women who are willing to serve. Currently, only two of every ten young Americans are qualified, both mentally and physically. We must also ensure that our professional military schools, in particular our war colleges, are the finest in the world.

8. We Must Reform the Inter-Agency Process to Leverage All Our Tools of National Power

America is not bringing the full abilities of our nation to bear on national security challenges. Both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have demanded expertise in building nations, expertise that is largely resident in agencies other than the Department of Defense. We must reform the inter-agency system to bring the capabilities of many agencies to bear on all aspects of national security challenges – from policy formulation to building the governmental capacity of nations and eliminating the ungoverned spaces in which terrorists find refuge. The Department of Defense properly focuses on providing the incredible military forces that protect our national interests, but those forces are not the right answer to every problem. The State Department and other agencies must play a more significant role in national security.

9. We Must Strike a Balance between Near-Term Fixes and Long-Term Modernization

The military services have been engaged in peacekeeping, disaster relief, humanitarian, and warfighting missions for nearly two decades, at operational tempos far in excess of planned rates. Failure to adequately modernize air, naval, and ground force equipment; growing costs and schedule delays in acquisition programs; and significant increases in active duty and retired personnel pay, benefit, and healthcare costs have resulted in an inventory of aged, stressed equipment that must be repaired and replaced, while the services continue to meet personnel costs and the demands of on-going operations.

At the same time the industrial base supporting military programs has dramatically changed through industry consolidation and contraction. Without funding in the coming decade, production lines will irreversibly close and skilled workforces will age or retire.

Each of the military services will have to address the fundamental imbalances in their current plans to simultaneously modernize and reset equipment, grow the number of ships in our Navy, increase the numbers in the Army and Marine Corps, fulfill BRAC requirements, improve the quality of the reserve forces, and support a range of personnel pay and health benefits. The next administration must determine whether the dramatic budget increases these plans require are achievable, and must establish the priorities required to revise them if funding is insufficient.

10. We Must Develop a More Comprehensive Counter-Terrorism Strategy

With al Qaeda and affiliated groups still presenting a major threat, the United States must apply “lessons learned” more comprehensively and be open to the advice of our allies fighting the same struggle if we are to effectively counter this persistent threat. The key is to fight “smarter”—not necessarily “harder”—by more effectively utilizing a range of tools beyond just the military-led, kinetic approaches to counterterrorism.

That means the new administration must more aggressively pursue strategic communications strategies, intelligence and policing work, targeted development assistance, and a range of other counterinsurgency and irregular warfare tools. Supporting a more comprehensive counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency strategy will require significant investment – an estimated \$2 billion – in both Special Operations Command and irregular and unconventional warfare initiatives.

11. We Must Deal with the Looming Defense Health Care Crisis

Challenges in the healthcare system are nothing new. The civilian sector is facing similar issues, but the defense health program faces unique challenges compared to the civilian sector that will need to be addressed in order to support our nation’s future security. There is a perfect storm brewing, and in the next few years, that storm will be upon us.

Defense health care costs are expected to grow exponentially over the next several years. In FY01, the defense health budget was \$19 billion, in 2008 the budget for health care benefits and services is \$40.5 billion. By 2015, the health budget is expected to rise to \$64 billion, assuming a health care inflation rate of 6 percent.

Recruitment and retention of qualified medical professionals continues to be a challenge, especially when individuals with the necessary medical skills to support our troops could make significantly more money outside of the military and not face the challenges of a military lifestyle. The incentives necessary to recruit and retain these qualified medical professionals will only continue to increase.

In addition to the shortage in medical professionals, there will also be an overwhelming demand placed on the medical system as it attempts to support thousands of men and women returning from combat, as well as their families. The current system is near the breaking point. Wounded warriors are waiting for care – especially mental health care, and family members are being told to wait as these troops return home. The demands on the system will only increase.

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