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The Pentagon's Balancing Act: A Special Address by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Admiral Michael G. Mullen

We're living in extremely challenging times. I was standing not too long ago outside the Pentagon with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and I asked him if in his 40-some years experience he'd ever seen so much going on. His comment was that he hadn't ever seen anything close—not as busy, not as intense, not as many issues, not as varied. And certainly, in my almost four decades of service that's the case.

I'd like to focus on those challenges this afternoon—in particular, the risks I think we're incurring from a military standpoint and about mitigating those risks given that these challenges are out there. These challenges are actually highlighted by incredible uncertainty about the future and an incredibly dangerous time that I think we're living in. They are also underscored by the fact that we're not very good historically—we haven't been very good about predicting the future. You can go back to many of the conflicts that we've been in, and there weren't many people that predicted that we'd been in whatever that conflict was.

In all that we do and how I approach this job, I really try to keep my focus on balance, given that uncertainty and that unpredictability: whether it's the resources against our mission; training against our training requirements; full spectrum versus what we're doing right now, an execution in terms of counterinsurgency; how we train with the capabilities we have and how we look to future training and those capabilities; the amount of time we're deployed balanced with the amount of time we're home; and then how much focus we put on the current fight we're in and how much focus we need to put on the future.

Talking Points

- U.S. military challenges are highlighted by incredible uncertainty about the future and the incredibly dangerous time that we're living in. We are incurring risks from a military standpoint and should mitigate those risks given that these challenges are out there.
- A withdrawal from Iraq before it is able to provide for its people and has a working economy and a secure environment is unacceptable.
- Engaging Pakistan across the board, not just on the border, is also very critical. We're focused now on helping them, from the military perspective, to train their trainers.
- It's a very delicate balance between requirements in Iraq, requirements in Afghanistan, the health of the force, and global requirements. We need to make sure we attract and retain the best people we can in our country to serve in our military.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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Being at headquarters here in Washington, one of my principal responsibilities is to make sure I can keep my head up above Iraq, above Afghanistan—in fact, above the Middle East—and look long term to make sure that we are taking into consideration what's out there and how to develop the military, how we recruit and retain our people, not just for the current fight, but for the challenges that will certainly come our way in the future.

How do we balance all that? That probably comes pretty close to my full-time job as Chairman. So I'll tell you a little bit about a "day in the life of a Chairman."

I'm concerned that we're not as balanced as we used to be—nor are we as balanced as we should be.

Focusing on Iraq

Clearly, right now the focus is on Iraq, and that's the right place to focus. Everyone wants to succeed in Iraq and give General David Petraeus and his commanders all the possible support they need to do that.

In fact, in testimony that Secretary Gates and I had the day after General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker left, we were asked about what our recommendations were. We both testified that our recommendations are very consistent with what General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker had brought forward.

From the military standpoint, certainly I was very comfortable with his assessment and spent a fair amount of time reviewing that with the Joint Chiefs. Admiral William Fallon, the commander of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), did the same thing, and, by and large, we arrived at the same conclusions, and we're very supportive of those recommendations.

Back to what I said, all of us want to succeed in Iraq, and we fully support his recommendations up to this point. But each of us has a different perspective, and I think sometimes that gets lost. David Petraeus is tactical commander on the ground. The CENTCOM commander has responsibility for the entire region and must take into consideration not just what's going on in Iraq, but in Afghanistan—and not just that.

That region is a region of tremendous instability. The area of focus moves from Lebanon all the way to Tehran and into South Central Asia and Afghanistan and Pakistan. It's a huge theater with an awful lot of challenges just in that theater alone. For myself and my fellow Chiefs, we really have the responsibility to not just understand what's going on in Iraq and the region; it's a global responsibility. How do you balance our capabilities? Where do you put them? What's going to happen in various parts on the world? What are we ready to handle and what are we concerned about in terms of readiness to handle—not just where we're focused now in fighting, but should something else happen.

All of us have different responsibilities and foci in that regard. And that's what we took into consideration, as well as the recommendations General Petraeus brought forward. It would be both irresponsible and imprudent, I think, not to keep that global focus, which is one of the things I try to do.

Basra and the Risks of Not Succeeding

I think the risks of not succeeding in Iraq right now would be exceptionally high. I get asked this question frequently. I worry about a withdrawal from Iraq at any time before Iraq is able to provide for its people, have an economy that's working, and have a secured environment that going to be acceptable. It doesn't have to be the perfect solution—clearly, the kind of future that is involved there is going to be heavily dependent on the politics in Iraq and the reconciliation that has started to move down the road—but Iraq still has an awful long way to go.

I focus on that when I talk about succeeding there, principally from the military standpoint. I don't think we can afford to have an Iraq that is a failed state in that part of the world. And that is directly tied to the interests in the Middle East and, quite frankly, directly tied to our national interests in that regard.

I'll just use an example of the kind of uncertainty that I talked about before. It's what happened in Basra just a couple weeks ago. If you spend time, and I have, with General Petraeus and others and look at what he's been doing since December, there was—and I'm sure will continue to be—a discussion about the 45 days and what it really means.

We started moving troops out of Iraq last December. We moved the Third Brigade out of the surge brigade at the end of March. Commanders on the ground have been continuously assessing and adjusting their battlefield geometry since last year. And it's that continuous assessment that has been ongoing and will continue to be ongoing the entire time that we have troops in Iraq. General Petraeus and others are doing that constantly.

I think there's great wisdom, in once we come down to 15 brigades, taking those 45 days as a time of consolidation and evaluation, making an assessment, and then moving forward with the way ahead—to include the possibility that we would continue to draw down troops if security conditions allow that. And if they don't, then obviously we'd have to make other adjustments.

As for things that will drive that, I'll just briefly use the example of Basra a couple weeks ago. That was a spike in violence that we hadn't anticipated. When we talk about the future, we expect Iraq to be a dangerous place for a significant period of time. Violence is going to occur. It really gets to what level is acceptable. When do Iraqi security forces have the capability and capacity to take care of its own security? That effort has been criticized from a tactical standpoint. There were some shortfalls in that, and we recognize that. I think it's also very important to understand that a year or two ago there wasn't much of a chance that the Iraqi security forces could have moved that quickly to a place of contact.

There has been progress. We've worked hard on that. The Iraqis have worked hard on that. And I think that will continue, but it's going to take some time.

Basra and the Iranian Influence

Another important part of Basra was obviously the Iranian influence. It really highlighted the Iranian influence in ways that some of us had not seen before as directly as occurred in that part of Iraq. And it certainly got an awful lot of peoples' attention across the board.

We've talked for a significant period of time about the training of Iraqis in Iran to come and fight us and kill our American and Coalition soldiers in Iraq. We've talked about the technology that Iran

has shipped into Iraq. We've talked about the flow across the border there, and yet, in the end, I think what became very evident was the politics of Iran; the politics of Muqtada al-Sadr; the politics of the leaders in that part of Iraq; and the lead that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki took to address not only the challenges—that he stepped forward and dealt with the violence and dealt with the thugs and the criminals—but also the political requirements that that country has to figure out over time.

Obviously, some violence broke out, and I think it would be unreasonable not to have some expectations that there are going to be episodes like that. Yet at the same time, as we move forward, it is this continuous assessment of where we are that will, I think, drive future decisions about what our next moves might be—strategically, operationally, and tactically to include how many troops of what kind and where they'll be.

I want to talk a little bit about the impact of focusing on Iraq. I think we need to be very clear about acknowledging that focus and acknowledging what we can do, what we've done, and also what we haven't been able to do. It is clearly having an effect on our ability to do other things.

Resourcing Iraq and Afghanistan

The one that is very obvious to me is the link to Afghanistan. President George W. Bush was in Bucharest the week before last, and he announced that the U.S. would commit to additional troops in Afghanistan some time in 2009. The availability of those troops is going to be directly tied to the troops that are in Iraq, and so until we come down in numbers of brigades in Iraq, the brigade size requirement that exists for Afghanistan just will not be met. That links us very directly.

So it's a resource issue, it's a requirements issue, and I've talked for a long time about Afghanistan being an economy of forced campaign—one that does not have enough resources to really go where you would like to go from the combat standpoint. Actually, our biggest shortfall there right now is in training resources. The center of gravity in Afghanistan is to train the Afghan army and the Afghan police, and we need about a brigade-sized effort to train the Afghans.

If I had another brigade, my next brigade would go there. After that, I would source the combat requirements. Right now we are focused on the south because we have 3,500 Marines who have recently deployed there. In the south, from a fighting standpoint, we are in pretty good shape. They're going to do not just the fighting; one of the two battalions will be involved in combat, and the other battalion will be involved in training. If the Marines are only going to be there for seven months and they're coming out at the end of the year, those requirements still exist. We would be looking to backfill them, and again, it's tied to available forces that are right now tied up in Iraq.

Afghanistan and Pakistan

I don't like to even bring up Afghanistan without talking about Pakistan, because I think they're linked, and I think we need to make sure our strategy includes not just Afghanistan but also Pakistan. We have a heavy focus on the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), and I think that's right. Clearly, if I were going to pick a place where the next attack is going to come from, that's where al-Qaeda is, and we're going to need to figure out a way to resolve that challenge.

At the same time, you have a brand new government that has been a good ally against terrorism. They're just getting their feet on the ground, and we have to be mindful that this is a new government working hard to figure out the direction they want to go. I've been there a few times. They have an extremist problem. Someone mentioned to me the other day they've had over 250 citizens killed by suicide bombers in January and February alone. They recognize they've got that problem, and I believe we must have a comprehensive strategy that includes Afghanistan and Pakistan.

And while it includes focus on that border—and that's really part of it—there are huge challenges by the tribes who have lived there for a long time. Having a thorough understanding of what that means should be also included in our approach to how we engage Pakistan as it moves out under this new leadership.

Engaging that leadership is going to be important. Engaging Pakistan across the board, not just

on the border, is also very critical. We're focused now on helping them from the military perspective, to train their trainers. It's really no more than that, nor do I expect it will be any more than that. The Pakistani army can shift from a conventional focus to a counterinsurgency focus. It's going to take them some time to do that; it did for us, and it clearly will for them. In my engagement with their leadership, they understand that, but I think that we have to be patient enough to recognize it's going to take some time.

This is back to the balance issue—things that we cannot do right now. I mentioned it briefly before: the full-spectrum aspect of what we're doing. I was actually taken back a little by General Petraeus, who talked about the combined arms aspect of some of the battles that they've been in in Iraq. When I say taken back, he specifically focused on that, but it has not been extensive, nor have we trained for it in any of our forces for a long time. Jim Conway and the Marine Corps specifically talk about Marine captains who've been in the Marine Corps for five or six years who've never seen a ship. That's not what the Marine Corps is, and that's not where Jim Conway or I believe the Marines need to be in the future. They've done spectacular work in this fight; they'll continue to do that, but we must be mindful that the 911 force for the U.S. is a vital force for us for the future.

That full-spectrum aspect of how they do business in the future is something we can't do right now that we need to move forward with based on what we've learned while trying to keep in balance all of the capabilities that we need as a military.

The same is true for the Army. While we've modularized, one of the unstated changes has been that the army has modularized itself so quickly. And the coin of the realm is a brigade, and everything's centered on that. We did it in a time of war, and at the same time, were not doing much combined arms training with the Army. How do I deal with artillery? How do I deal with air defense? How do I deal with both air control and close air support?

Though certainly some of that—and in some cases, a lot of that, particularly air support—is going on, the point is that we're trading that off right now. I think that's got to be something that

right for the future as we get to a point where we can start to build off time back here for forces.

Balancing Rotations

The rotation is also out of balance. The President announced last week that we'll reduce 15-month deployments to 12 months. I think that's a very important step. We need to get to the point where we start to build dwell time. I travel a lot, meet with lots of troops. I travel with my wife, she meets with spouses in the Army and Marine Corps particularly, and the families are very brittle. We talk about the security in Iraq being fragile and tenuous, and for the families, they're very brittle.

Multiple deployments—there is an awful lot of stress tied to that, and there's a tension there as well for the members, principally the ground forces but not exclusively. I don't want to understate what both the Air Force and the Navy have done to provide forces on the ground to CENTCOM to assist in critical ways all of our ground forces. But our ground forces have borne the brunt of all of this, and that pressure's there. We must move ahead to a point where we can get them back twice as long as they've been deployed.

Some of you here remember one-year deployments. I do, too. One year was a long time; 15 months is too long. There's a balance here, because in the kind of war fighting we're in, the kind of counterinsurgency operations we're in, being there for a time makes a difference. It takes time to establish relationships. It takes time to learn to understand the people, and the people are the center of gravity for success in the long run. Moving to 12 months is key. That will take off some pressure, and that starts the first of August this year. Any unit deploying from the army after August 1, 2008, will only go for 12 months. Then we need to get individuals back home for two years for each year they're deployed. That's key as well, and it will be a while before we get beyond that. So the health of the force is another part of the balancing act to make sure we keep that in balance. It's a very delicate balance right now between requirements in Iraq, requirements in Afghanistan, the health of their force, and global requirements.

As I talk about an economy of force campaign in

Afghanistan, we're doing the same kind of thing around the world. We're globally employed from this standpoint because we have so many of our forces tied up in CENTCOM. This doesn't mean we don't have additional capabilities—we do in the Navy and Air Force. We have small units deployed in Central and South America, in the Pacific, in Africa, and today, in fact, one of our Navy ships is in the Gulf of Guinea on the west coast of Africa in an engagement activity that is very important. But the focus of our resources, rightfully so, is in the Central Command area of responsibility.

I just left a hearing, and I was very encouraged. Secretaries Gates and Rice and I testified in front of the House Armed Services Committee speaking to building partnership capacity and doing it together and doing it across our government. It shouldn't be the responsibility of one of our government agencies, but the message that's really in the hearing is we must integrate more wholly across the government. All of that is directly tied to the world we're living in, and our government needs to be adjusted significantly for the world we're living in in the 21st century.

Balance and the Center of Gravity

One last comment about balance: It's this balance between what we're doing today and what we're doing tomorrow. One of my principal responsibilities is to build the military for the future in a very uncertain time, a very dangerous time, and a very unpredictable time. That takes balance as well. It takes all the services; it takes conventional capabilities; it takes counterinsurgency capabilities; it takes an ability to fight irregular warfare, which is what we're doing now. It also takes capacity to engage early in what we call "phase zero" operations in places like Africa, South America, the Pacific, and the Indian Ocean; to establish relationships; to establish partners to do that globally; and to be preventative in nature so that conflicts don't break out in the future.

So having the right balance for investment now and in the future is very important. I've talked about having at least 4 percent of the gross domestic product go for defense. It's less the exact number than it is a marker to say we need to have a national debate

about how much we want to spend on our security.

In these very dangerous times, the highest level I believe we get is the military the American people want. The American people vote in those people who go to Congress, come to Washington, and make decisions. Out of that process is generated the military that we need not just now but in the future. And there are huge challenges out there, not just the economic challenges we're in now. There are other bow waves of great entitlement that are headed our way in the next 10, 20, 30 years that we as a country will have to deal with, not unlike security in Iraq or security in Afghanistan or security in other parts of the world.

I believe we have to have a military and a national security apparatus that provides for the kind of deterrent and preventative capability that will allow

our country to thrive. We are linked throughout the world more now than we've ever been. To do that it must be resourced not just in dollars, but with the right kind of capabilities. Those dollars must go to the right places to build not just the equipment, the airplanes, the ships, the tanks, and the weapons.

I think that the center of gravity in our future is our people. We need to make sure we attract and retain the best people we can in our country to serve in our military—to make a difference, to answer that noble calling to ensure that our security and the security globally is such that parents all over the world can raise their children to a higher standard of living and a better life.

—Admiral Michael G. Mullen is the 17th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.