

By Rep Ike Skelton, Chairman, US Congress House Armed Services Committee

On 2nd April the House Armed Services Committee meets in open session to receive testimony on the New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan and Developments in U.S. Central Command and Special Operations Command. The witnesses : the Honorable Michèle Flournoy, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy; General David Petraeus, commander of United States Central Command; and Admiral Eric Olson, commander of United States Special Operations Command.

As we begin to consider the new Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy, let me just say, it's about time. In 2001, United States forces, in cooperation with the British and Afghan forces, forced the Taliban out of power. As near as I can tell, that was the last time we had a strategy for Afghanistan.

As any student of military history can tell you, you can lose even with a good strategy, but there's no way to win with no strategy. And for the last 7 years we have had no strategy and Afghanistan has been getting worse.

So it pleases me greatly that the Administration undertook a serious policy review and came up with a real strategy to address Afghanistan and Pakistan. We have finally realized that this important region can no longer be 'America's Forgotten War.'

I think that this strategy largely gets it right. The President, almost a week ago, got it right when he pointed out that the ultimate focus of our efforts is to eliminate Al Qaeda and remove the sanctuaries from which they are constantly planning attacks against us. That is the right goal, and we should always remember it.

I strongly supported the President's decision to add 17,000 troops in Afghanistan, and I support his most recent decision to add another 4,000 as trainers and mentors for the Afghan Security Forces. As the President noted, we can bring our troops home when the Afghans themselves can carry the burden of security.

But we won't win a counterinsurgency fight in Afghanistan through military means alone, so I am glad that the strategy calls for a real increase in civilian assistance for Afghanistan, and even more, asks our allies to increase their efforts. This is not just America's war.

I am also pleased that the strategy recognizes that success in Afghanistan will require more effective action on both sides of the border. Destroying Al Qaeda and their sanctuaries in Pakistan will require disrupting terrorist networks, advancing democratic government control and promoting economic stability in Pakistan. We must also develop a mutually beneficial long-term U.S.-Pakistan partnership, and work with international partners, on these efforts.

None of this will be done quickly or easily, but the administration's new strategy is an important step in the right direction.

But this strategy—on both sides of the border—must have accountability. What we are missing at the moment is details on how this strategy will be achieved and how progress will be measured.

How will we assure that the Pakistanis step up and become real partners? What is the proposed new Pakistan Counterinsurgency Capability Fund and how will it propose changing existing authorities? How will we affect real civil-military coordination on the ground in Afghanistan? What are the metrics we will use to measure progress of our forces and civilians, of the Afghan government and military, and of Pakistan? These are the details we are looking for.

Very shortly, this Congress—including this committee—will take action to authorize and appropriate funds to support our Afghan and Pakistani partners. Measures of accountability must and will be part of that effort. I hope our witnesses will take the opportunity here today to talk about what approaches may be the most productive in ensuring these partners make progress.

We are committed to a long-term and consistent relationship with both Afghanistan and Pakistan. But the Congress and the American people are being asked to put up significant resources over a sustained period. There must be accountability and a measurable return on this investment.