

By Rep Ike Skelton, Chairman, House Armed Services Committee, U.S.Congress

More than anything else, I am pleased that we finally have a strategy to address Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan has been the forgotten war, and President Obama corrects this regrettable mistake. There is no guarantee of success with this strategy, but not having a strategy, as we have not for the past eight years, is certainly a guarantee of failure. At last, we can finally see a way ahead in this most important war.

As the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, I applauded the President's recent approval of an additional 17,000 troops for Afghanistan. However, we will not win in Afghanistan and Pakistan through military means alone. We cannot kill our way into victory, which is why the President's strategy focuses on a whole of government approach. We need more civilian resources in Afghanistan to help build the Afghan government and help rebuild the country. As any Member of Congress who has visited Afghanistan can tell you, the U.S. government civilians there have done their absolute best, but there have been too few of them, they have not been well coordinated with the military effort, and there has been very little direction from Washington. This new plan and new leadership will change that.

I am also pleased that the strategy calls for renewing American leadership of the international effort. The Canadians, English, Dutch, and many other nations have made tremendous sacrifices in blood and treasure in Afghanistan. We honor their sacrifices and thank them for their contributions. As the most powerful nation on earth and the country who led this coalition into Afghanistan, America owes it to our allies to reinvigorate the international effort. We owe them, as much as we owe ourselves, victory against extremist militants and terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

At the same time, we must understand, and the President clearly does, that while we can help fight Al Qaeda and the Taliban, ultimately it is the Afghans themselves who will provide for their own security and end this war. The new strategy calls for expanded Afghan security forces, and more American trainers to work with them, so that they can fight this war against the forces that shut down schools and brutally attack female students. The day the Afghans can stand against their enemies and ours without substantial military aid is the day our troops come home, and the strategy reflects this.

Finally, I am pleased that the strategy recognizes the vital importance of Pakistan. Pakistan has served as a sanctuary for the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and while the Pakistani military has helped to fight them at times, they did not have the capability to win that fight. Even worse, some in the Pakistani political process and intelligence services hedged their bets and made common cause with extremist groups. The President's strategy correctly recognizes that success will require action on both sides of the border, not just in Afghanistan.