

**CENTER FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS)**

**SECURITY AND STABILITY IN THE BROADER MIDDLE EAST:
A COOPERATIVE APPROACH**

WELCOME:
JOHN HAMRE,
PRESIDENT AND CEO,
CSIS

MODERATOR:
JON ALTERMAN,
DIRECTOR, MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM,
CSIS

SPEAKERS:
ADMIRAL MICHAEL MULLEN,
CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

TUESDAY, JULY 7, 2009

*Transcript by
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.*

JOHN HAMRE: Okay. Folks, I know that not everybody has yet had their dessert, but please do enjoy it, but quietly, as we proceed. We have a limited amount of time with the chairman and I don't want to cheat any of you from having an opportunity to hear Admiral Mullen.

I was thinking back when I first had the privilege to meet Admiral Mike Mullen. It was back when I was in the department. And he was the commander of the George Washington battle group. And I believe it was in Bahrain in '97, I think, or '98. And as is the custom in the department when, at Thanksgiving, senior officers get behind the chow line and serve food to the sailors and the troops.

And I had the privilege of being on the George Washington with Mike at that time and saw him in his multiple dimensions as a leader, obviously a leader that – you know, it's a pretty big deal to be the commander of a battle group, and he not only was doing that, but you could see the personal esteem that he had with the young sailors that would come through the line and recognize him not just with kind of detached awe, but with genuine appreciation and admiration.

And it was a sign of the leadership that, frankly, he's brought to the department in the many different roles that he's played, obviously right now in this very crucial role as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. You know, the chairman – this is a very unique position. It's one of the few positions in law that is stipulated quite clearly, the responsibilities. And stated in layman's terms, he represents 1.6 million active-duty men and women and 1.2 million reservists as the single person who talks to the president to help him decide what to do.

He is the representative of the entire uniformed services to the president in guiding our policies. And it's truly an awesome responsibility. It's one of those responsibilities that you give to someone not just because of his intellect, but because of his character. And we've seen that consistently in who we've brought forth from among us to be the chairman of the Joint Chiefs – a remarkable individual doing a superb job.

Michael, thank you for joining us today. People wanted to be here to hear you. You see this turnout – this is exceptional – but it reflects the crucial times we're in and the leadership you're giving. Ladies and gentlemen, please help me welcome the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mike Mullen.

(Applause.)

ADMIRAL MICHAEL MULLEN: Thank you, John. Truly, one of the joys of being in this business is to meet and work with special people. And back to that time that John talks about, when I actually really did meet him in what I thought was my last tour in the Navy and recognized he, his spouse, and how special they were, and literally, how much they cared and

have had great opportunity to work with John since. And John, thank you for all you've done and all you do, with great expectations for the future, by the way, as well.

Mr. Ambassador, in particular, I'd like to say thanks to you for hosting this, and you and your country's dedication to our partnership, as is the case with so many of the countries who are here. To Chairman Zinni, I just wanted to say hello. We're here – a lot of us are here and still around because we had people that affected us when we were young, and Tony Zinni is one of those that all of us coming up looked to as a model in so many ways as an officer, who had a wide bandwidth, great reach and someone who could actually do so many things. And so it's great to see you here, Tony, and congratulations, I think, on your new assignment. (Laughter.)

This is about the Middle East, and I'll talk for a few minutes and then open it, certainly, up to questions. As I walked in, John said they almost had a heart attack because they saw me in Moscow yesterday, and actually, I can say that there were many in Moscow on Sunday that said, isn't he supposed to be here, when I was doing the television shows on Sunday morning here. So it's actually part of the job that is both challenging and rewarding, but it really is terrific to be with you for the time today.

I think the gathering alone speaks to the requirement for cooperation, and also the priority for the broader Middle East and the challenges that we have. And I won't, certainly, go over all of them. When I came in as chairman, one of the priorities for me – in fact, my top priority, was to work on strategic issues associated with the broader Middle East, because I feel then and continue to feel now it's the most volatile area, it's an area that has challenges which abound and that no one can address alone – not the United States – and that we must do this across the full spectrum not just of our government, which includes much more than the military, includes all aspects of our national power, as well as that of so many other countries around the world.

In recent months, certainly – at that time, we were heavily focused, obviously, on Iraq, and that has now shifted. The main effort has now shifted to Afghanistan and the regional approach, to include Afghanistan and Pakistan, and really, the broader strategic approach there is so critical. But the challenges, which I spoke to then, are still there, from Beirut to Tehran to a stable Gulf, with trying to understand how we proceed into the future and how we engage and address the countries that are involved in this, is so critical.

And I'm also fond of saying that, as urgent as the situation is – and it is and continues to be – there also needs to be both a long-term view and an element of patience that recognizes we're not going to solve these things overnight. It's going to take a while. It's going to take constant engagement, constant pressure, a comprehensive approach across all aspects of what we do.

I'll speak just briefly for a second on Pakistan and Afghanistan. And as I think about that, clearly, new leadership there, both on the political side – diplomatic side – with Ambassador Eikenberry and those that are working for him in the embassy, new leadership with General Stan McChrystal, who's been out there for a couple of weeks, now, and is very, obviously, focused on understanding the entire situation as he is commanding it. I think in the

last day or so, he issued a tactical directive that focuses very specifically on minimizing, eliminating civilian casualties.

And I think that speaks – and what he said in his testimony is a critical benchmark. It's not about how many enemy we kill; it's about how many civilians we protect. And that thrust says an awful lot about what he is about and what we all need to be focusing on there. But we've lost – as many of you know – we lost seven soldiers yesterday. It is indicative of expectations that I've had for some time that this fight is going to be tough. It's going to be tougher before it gets easier.

We've added significant additional forces, and I think they're – the operation which the Marines kicked off last week is indicative of that – very focused in the South, heavily focused in the South in Helmand, and so I think we are in for a tough fight. And I was asked the other day how long – it's always a question that's very difficult to answer. The answer I gave was weeks, not weeks or months, certainly, is what I understand right now, but it's just beginning, and we actually don't know. We're going to have to see, you know, how this operation goes.

I'm comfortable that strategically, we know how to do this. A fully resourced counterinsurgency is the strategy approach, and there are elements of that – and certainly, this is a piece of it – and we've got to be able to create the security, not just us alone or with our coalition partners out there, many of whom are represented today by the ambassadors who are here, but also in rapidly training the Afghan security forces – the police and the army – to have them assume responsibility for their security as quickly as possible, and then follow that with holding and building from the development side, the diplomatic side that must move forward.

Moving quickly to Iraq, clearly, last week was a big week and the 30th of June was a big day, as our combat troops moved out of the cities. That was principally focused on Baghdad and Mosul, because we'd been moving out of the cities over the last eight months, and we are now positioned outside of the cities in support of the Iraqi security forces. And while there have been some incidents, and recently, some high-profile attacks, the month of June – the overall levels of violence, number of incidents was the lowest since the war started.

So at least over the last few days, it's gone well. Clearly, we know it's a vulnerable time. It's a time of transition. Any time of transition, there's always vulnerabilities. But right now, it's proceeding as General Odierno had said he hoped it would once we got the troops out of the cities. An awful lot to do in Iraq between now and the end of 2011 – major elections at the beginning of next year clearly a focus, security for those, making sure we get those right.

Our overall force levels will be about where they are through the end of the year, and then after those elections, an expectation next spring that they come down fairly dramatically from the 120,000 to 130,000 that are there to the 35,000 to 50,000 that was part of the announcement by President Obama when he talked about his Iraq strategy. To be out of Iraq by the end of 2011, is where we are.

And a lot of political challenges associated with that that political leadership has to engage, and I'm actually encouraged by Vice President Biden's visit and that commitment on the

part of our government to make sure that we have that focus as well. And I've also seen Ambassador Hill grab the reins very quickly and work those issues very hard as well.

Clearly, another huge challenge, I think, for all of us in that part of the world is Iran. And I won't speak to the political issues there, but on the security side, political challenges notwithstanding, still very concerned about their development of nuclear weapons, their funding and sponsoring terrorism, focusing that support on Hezbollah, Hamas, et cetera, being a destabilizing influence in the region as opposed to a stabilizing influence in the region. And I believe there's a need to certainly reach out and engage in dialogue with them. And that's obviously up to the political leadership.

I am concerned about them having a nuclear weapon, and as – if they got to that point, that being incredibly destabilizing, not just because they'd have the weapon. I deal an awful lot in Pakistan and Afghanistan relationships, and if you just look at those two countries and where they were at one point in time and what's happened since they both achieved that capability, I worry about an arms race – a nuclear arms race – in the Middle East region as well. And I don't think any of us can afford that. That would be, potentially, very destabilizing as well.

And I don't see a lot of space between where Iran is headed and then potentially what might happen with respect to that development, and so there's a great deal that certainly depends on the dialogue and the engagement, and I think we need to do that with all options remaining on the table, including certainly, military options. One other area I'd like to comment about is just sort of – and it's an extension of the nuclear weapons issue – it's the counter-WMD, counterterrorism piece. And what I've worried about for some time is terrorists who get their hands on nuclear devices.

And I know they seek that. And at the very high end, al-Qaida still both seeks that capability and sees us as the enemy and our broad-term engagement, I think, across the entire Middle East – and this is all of us – to create partnerships and dialogue and understanding and work to make sure that both, from the terrorism standpoint as well as the proliferation standpoint, we do everything we can to absolutely minimize that.

I guess I'll leave it at that. I don't think the broader Middle East has ever been more important, not just to the regional stability, but to global stability. And as I said earlier, I just came out of Moscow, and one of the issues that certainly was discussed was the, you know, focus in this part of the world as well, and that responsible leadership throughout the world, I think, we need to focus on this and make sure that we generate peaceful outcomes and not ones that generate more conflict, with so many different challenges in that part of the world. With that, I'm happy to take questions.

(Applause.)

JON ALTERMAN: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm Jon Alterman. I run the Middle East program here and I'll be trying to be traffic cop for this session. We just ask four rules. First, if we could wait for the microphone so we can get the sound – so everybody can

hear. Second, that as a courtesy to the chairman, you identify yourself so he knows who he's talking to.

That you ask only one question and that you ask your question in the form of a question, which is not to make a statement and then say, what do you think of my statement. (Laughter.) So if we have agreement on all those points, I'd be happy to open the floor. Yeah?

Q: Richard Weitz, the Hudson Institute. When you were in Moscow, did the issue of Russia's possible completion of the sale of the S-300 air defense missiles come up, because that's been factoring into the decision-making process in Israel, and hence, here, about what kind of Iranian threat we might see and what kind of timeline we might have to respond to that?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm happy to broadly talk about the summit and certainly, my engagement in it. It is something – actually, part of the – the documents that were signed was a document that I signed with my counterpart, General Makarov, and it focuses on the mil-to-mil cooperation. I had actually been in Moscow with him the week before, based on having a counterpart visit – I'd actually hosted my Russian counterpart over 18 months ago.

And one of the areas I've certainly discussed with him in the past is that issue, and recognizing that that is a significant – that particular system is a game-changer in that part of the world, and I focused on that. And that's probably all I'd say about that today without going into great – I'm not going to go into any details of the summit, as it hasn't really even ended yet – but that's a huge concern because of the potential that it has, and I've raised that, certainly, with my counterpart.

MR. ALTERMAN: Molly?

Q: Molly Williamson, Middle East Institute. Do you anticipate greater cooperation between Washington and Moscow vis-à-vis Iran, and if so, what would that look like?

ADM. MULLEN: Again, I wouldn't – I can't – I wouldn't go into any detail. Certainly, it was discussed, and I'll leave it up to the president and the administration to lay that out. Certainly, going in, there were concerns about trying to get that right with respect to the Middle East, and specifically how Iran fed into all that. And I know there were discussions about that, and the honest truth is, I just don't have the details on those discussions.

Q: Hi. Yochi Dreazen from the Wall Street Journal. Admiral, I was struck a moment ago by how explicitly you said that, in the case of Iran, all options are on the table, which you often say, but then you explicitly again said the military option, specifically. How close do you think we are to the point beyond which an Iranian nuclear bomb becomes inevitable? How much time is there left to deter that from happening? And how close do you think we are, really, to a point of no return?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I wouldn't over-read the fact that I said including military options, because when I've said all options on the table, I certainly have been inclusive of those and it certainly – this isn't the first time I've said that to include the explicit statement. Where

we're challenged here is the timeframe – which depending on who you talk to, the estimates of when they would develop a nuclear weapon and again based on both your assumptions and who you talk to it's been one to three years. It's sort of in that kind of timeframe.

My concern is that the clock has continued to tick. I believe Iran is very focused on developing this capability and I think when they get it or should they get it will be very destabilizing. I often times I get – another question is the whole strike option piece of that. I also think that would be very destabilizing because of them – actually in both cases, certainly a strike or them getting the weapon – those are hugely significant in and of themselves.

But there is also with both of those kinds of possibilities there are unintended consequences that are very difficult to predict in a very volatile, highly volatile part of the world and I worry as much about that as well. So that's why I talk about this very narrow space that we have to work towards an objective of not achieving that capability.

And I think the time window is closing without being exact on what it is, as I indicated. The clock's ticking and that's why I'm as concerned as I am.

MR. ALTERMAN: Mr. Chairman, you had started by talking about cooperation. Could you talk specifically about the Iranian issue in terms of the cooperation especially on the military side rather than on the diplomatic side?

ADM. MULLEN: In terms with?

MR. ALTERMAN: In terms of cooperation. Cooperation on military issues deterring and defending against Iran.

ADM. MULLEN: Cooperation with anybody? Or – (chuckles).

MR. ALTERMAN: With original states.

ADM. MULLEN: Certainly we share the concerns. I'm in touch with my counterparts who are in lots of countries who share the concerns with respect to that. We've worked with our Gulf partners to look at the development of regional defense capability. And I see that as – they are very committed to that and expanding that capability over time. We think that's an important both initiative and recently the steps that have been taken with regard to that I think have been positive.

So there's cooperation and exchange, both bilateral and multilateral on this issue all the time, yet again I am concerned about, you know, the clock's moving.

MR. ALTERMAN: Thank you.

Q: Mr. Chairman, I'm Chris Isham from CBS. There have been a lot of questions over the years about both the will and the capacity of the Pakistani military and taking on the Taliban

internally. Could you comment on their performance in the recent operation in the Swat Valley and whether you think they have the capacity of going further into North and South Waziristan?

ADM. MULLEN: I am very encouraged by what I see based on their recent operations in Swat Valley and before that in Mohmand and Buner and Bajaur. And if you and I were having a conversation a year ago about this, there was a great deal of criticism about the Pakistani military not moving at all in the west. And they've moved a lot.

I know the chief of staff of the army, General Kayani, is committed to this. There's been, in my view and understand – he understands and I think the leadership in Pakistan understands they have a very serious threat internal to their country and they are addressing that. So they've – and when I was last there a couple months ago – he took me out to two training areas where he is developing counterinsurgency training.

I watched two of his companies go through this and he's got it now throughout his force. He's got rotation plans and again it's a very deliberate plan. He's pushed in terms of his overall military capacity as well – he's got two fronts. We can argue about whether or not India is a threat to them or not – I can assure you that the Pakistani people and the Pakistani people think India is a threat and that's his responsibility to address that. So he's got that front on the East and he's also moving forces to the West.

So they've gotten a lot better, they've learned lessons just as we learned lessons in Iraq about how to do this. They're getting better at it. They need support, they need enabling capabilities not unlike what we learn, whether it's helicopters or night vision capability. Those kinds of things – so they're moving in the right direction and they're moving in a measured pace.

This time I think what's different this time in Swat as opposed to last time in Swat is the commitment to hold not just to clear out the insurgents, and that's where he is right now and as I said earlier sometimes this doesn't happen at a pace that we'd like, but it's their country and they get to pick that pace.

MR. ALTERMAN: All the way in the back against the wall please.

Q: Mr. Chairman, I'm wondering if you can give us an update on AFRICOM. I know for a while that DOD was looking to base it somewhere in North Africa, in the Middle East and looking for a permanent home. Do you have an update on that?

ADM. MULLEN: I think it was a few months ago that the secretary of Defense made the decision that it would continue to be based in Stuttgart for the next – I think it's through the next three years – I think '09, '10 and '11. And as far as I'm concerned, it's worked. It's off to a great start. It really is a command – I think incredibly well led by General Kip Ward who has rich experience both in Europe as well as in Africa.

It's a full-time commitment now to a continent that in my view needed that in terms of both engagement and support for countries whose militaries have challenges in ways that we engage quite frankly in other combatant commands around the world.

There certainly are big challenges there that General Ward is addressing but both from a staffing standpoint – I think it's important to mention that this staff is a different kind of staff because senior State Department representation is there, his deputy is a former ambassador. One of the two deputies that he has – and more than any other command the focus on the broad capabilities of our government, leaders from the different agencies of our government are embedded in this staff and with an overall objective of being preventative long term as opposed to having to deal with conflict.

So I'm actually encouraged not just by where it is, but by what General Ward and Ambassador Yates and others are doing in Africa.

MR. ALDERMAN: In that corner over there.

Q: Hi, I'm Doug Brooks. I'm with IPOA. We represent the contractors supporting the mission in Iraq, Afghanistan and also in Africa.

My question is actually on the Afghan military and police, the security sector side. How is the training and professionalization (ph) going there? At what point do we expect that they will actually be taking the lead on a lot of these counter Taliban missions and so on? What's the status? If you could just give us a little more of an update that'd be great.

ADM. MULLEN: Actually not unlike Iraq, we're far ahead on the Army side, with respect to that as opposed to the training for the police. We've under-resourced the training piece in the past; we're going to send an entire brigade. The 4th of the 82nd is going over later this year to arrive towards the end of the summer focused specifically on training of the Afghan police because we know we're behind. We know how critical that is.

Probably no more critical element to holding than the police being able to do that and provide security once the insurgents are cleared out. So we recognize that as a priority, but that's what – and we are both concerned about and focused on the quality; many of the same kinds of issues that we had in Iraq with respect to that.

One of the things that strikes me – these are two different countries and I want to be very careful about drawing direct comparisons between Iraq and Afghanistan. But there was a time and it wasn't very long ago, 18 months ago or so, maybe a little longer ago, that our biggest concern in Iraq were the police.

Very much the same kind of thing I hear now with respect to Afghanistan. And yet we were able to both provide the trainers, build the capacity where – and this was also tied to improved leadership in the minister of interior. And Minister Atmar, whom I know, all of us think is a very strong leader and is very committed to this.

So it's that combination of institution building in the ministry of interior as well as the development of the police that is so critical to getting this right for the future. So I think it's going to take a while to do that but we have it as a priority to move it as rapidly as we can.

MR. ALDERMAN: Arnaud.

Q: Arnaud de Borchgrave, CSIS. Admiral, you've spoken several times about the untoward consequences that would flow from military action against Iran either by Israel or the United States. I wonder if you could give us some examples of these serious untoward consequences.

ADM. MULLEN: Well, if you – and I don't want to get into too many hypotheticals, despite the attractiveness – (laughter) – of that. But you worry about – I worry a great deal about the response of a country that gets struck and the vulnerabilities that regional countries have who are our great friends of ours, their populations. And then what's next.

And then how does it end up? And does it in fact get contained or does it expand? I mean it's that kind of scenario; that is one for example – and certainly responses potentially in other parts of the world. One of the things that, at least in my experience over the last two decades is we're not very good predicting, we're not very good at predicting what's going to happen. We're not very good predicting where it's going to happen.

And I don't just mean we; I mean, lots of countries in the world – but I can focus on us. And then what are we prepared for, given that unpredictability? So it is a really, from my perspective, it is a really importance place to not go if we cannot go there in any way shape or form.

MR. ALTERMAN: Jerry, right here.

Q: Jerry Seib, Wall Street Journal. Admiral Mullen, you know better than we do that there's been a lot of discussion in the last couple of weeks about whether there is or is not some kind of a ceiling on troop levels, American troop levels, in Afghanistan. So the question is, is there or is there not a ceiling on troop levels in Afghanistan? (Laughter.)

And if there is not, when do you think you will know what the level, near term to mid term is going to be?

ADM. MULLEN: There is not a ceiling on troop levels in Afghanistan. General McChrystal has gone over there and part of his guidance and tasking is to zero base troop levels and tell us what you need. And he is – that's a 60-day assessment, so he comes back sometime within that 60-day period to make his recommendations. He is doing that as we speak. I actually have not spoken to him so I can't tell you how it's going because I really am anxious to give him time and space to figure this out.

He has all the troops that his predecessor has asked for, that President Obama has committed through 2009. In the interim, he will come back with his assessment and my guidance to him is you tell me what you need, bring it back to Washington and we'll take it from there.

I also want him – and very specifically, and actually it's the same discussion I've had with General Odierno is – you need to make sure that every single American soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, or Coast Guardsman that is there in your theater is someone that you need.

We can – we do very well at, you know, moving forces in. We do that, and sometimes we're challenged at moving forces out in terms of the specifics other than on normal rotation. So you don't need to wait to a rotation date if someone doesn't need to be there.

So that's General McChrystal – that's the totality of his tasking. And then we'll see what capabilities he needs and how many forces he needs to do that. And that's really where we are.

MR. ALTERMAN: The lady right here in the pink, and then after her, Ron Neumann.

MARTHA RADDATZ: Martha Raddatz, from ABC. The lady in pink. (Laughter.)

MR. ALTERMAN: I don't have my glasses on.

MS. RADDATZ: (Chuckles.) Admiral Mullen, I want to follow up on Chris' question about Pakistan. Are you really confident that the Pakistan military can hold those areas they've gone into? I mean this is an army that went in with no thought for the internally displaced people. There are about 3 million of them now. So if you'll answer that – and also whether they should go into Waziristan given the population of internally displaced people – but first, on the hold issue.

ADM. MULLEN: Let me talk about where they should go in first. That's really their decision. And clearly there is a growing threat to Pakistan headed up by Baitullah Mehsud that Pakistan is very focused on. So that's theirs to decide that's where the threat is. And I don't see that threat going away until they get at that, first of all.

All of us share a concern about the IDPs – the internally displaced people. There have been significant predictions about how disastrous this IDP creation based on operations would be. And from what I've seen, the results have not met those dire predictions that were out there.

That doesn't mean that the IDP challenge isn't significant. I know that General Kayani in particular recognizes this. There's a general by the name of Nadeem who led their relief effort in the earthquake in 2005, and who was assigned immediately before this operation to address this IDP issue. And they've been very committed to that.

Do they have all the resources? No. There's international commitment to this. The United States has actually provided several hundred million dollars to support this. And we're all concerned because monsoon season is coming up, and they've got to start moving here pretty quickly.

That said, in the public discussion, in the internal deliberations that I've seen and participated in, it has not been as bad as everybody predicted it would be. So that piece is one we continue to be very concerned about, and it is a challenge, and, I think, recognized so.

And then the last thing is hold. He has committed to holding; he has put forces in place to hold. When the Swat operation started, within the first week or two, I got routinely asked is, well, what do you think? The question is, could he sustain the Swat operation? And he has started to do that. The same question now is there for a hold. He's committed to holding; he's put forces in place to do that. So we'll see.

But one of the things in my interaction with him over the last year-and-a-half is he's done what he said he was going to do. And he has committed to that and executed that, and that's why I'm more optimistic than I am pessimistic. But I don't underestimate the significance of the challenge. It's a big one.

Q: Admiral Mullen, Ron Neumann, former ambassador to Afghanistan. You spoke very correctly, I think – I'm trying to avoid statements – about the need to protect the population and where we're going in the training.

But would you speak to whether – that may be too hard if the policy decision isn't there. My perception is that you can't get where you want to go with the size of the Afghan security forces which are now on the drawing board and existing – which is only about one-third of what existed already in Iraq when we began the surge. How do we get to the point you correctly defined of turning over security to Afghan forces?

ADM. MULLEN: General McChrystal is doing – actually it's General Formica who is the training general that's there – is doing a detailed analysis on what it takes in terms of the overall security forces for Afghanistan. That's a combination of police as well as army. And that analysis is ongoing as we speak.

Right now, we're in the mid-80,000 for the army with the Afghan army. And that is to go to a level of 134,000 that's authorized right now. And we recognize that 134,000 may not be right and it may go up significantly. And the same for the police, where there are some 82,000 police that are authorized, and actually, that are in place. The police – the challenge isn't the number. The challenge is the quality and the training and getting them out there throughout Afghanistan. But that may grow as well.

Your question is a good question. You have to have a force size well enough to do that. In Iraq, it's well over 600,000 by the time all is said and done. So it's that combination of – what's the overall goal, but there's also the reality of – we can only build them up so quickly. And we're doing that right now, and General Formica is very committed – not just him – but certainly, as a leader, is doing that.

And we're trying to take a lot of the things that we learned in Iraq with respect to this in terms of how to do it. take those lessons that took us some time there; compress them, accelerate it – given the opportunity that we have, with respect to that, which I think we do right now.

Q: Hisham Melhem, Al Arabiya. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Sir, the Iranians keep saying that an Israeli attack on their nuclear facilities would be seen as an American attack. And

I'm sure they would interpret the statement by Vice President Biden as some sort of green light to the Israelis. Talk a little bit about what you hear from your Arab friends and from the Israelis about the nature of the Iranian retaliation. You spoke about the difficulty of anticipating that kind of reaction, and the vulnerabilities of your friendly states in the region. And that probably includes the American forces in Iraq, includes the oil fields in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, and also, a concern that another front would be activated – the Lebanese-Israeli front. What do you hear from your allies and what are your concerns also, but specifically about these areas: oil fields and the Lebanese-Israeli front?

ADM. MULLEN: I spent a lot of time in direct engagement and time with my Israeli counterpart, General Ashkenazi. And over the last year, year-and-a-half – and this, I don't think, is news to anybody – but fundamental to this is the Israelis see that Iran achieving a nuclear weapon capability adds an existential threat. And that fact is tied to the rhetoric of the leadership of Iran, which has said that they would seek to eliminate Israel.

And so what I think is very important, at least, certainly, from my perspective, is to understand the word "existential." And that Israel gets to speak for itself, act for itself – it's a sovereign country. But that's a very real part of this entire discussion. And I think actually most, from my perspective, my counterparts, my engagements in the Middle East, including most of the Gulf area, understand that they may or may not agree, but they understand that that's clearly where Israel is.

And so that, to me, is a very real part of all of what we're dealing with here. And that gets back to the criticality, in my view, of solving this before Iran gets a nuclear capability, or that anyone would take action to strike them. And I think that window is a very narrow window. So I'm actually encouraged by our political leadership committed to the dialogue, even after the challenges that obviously arose in the election cycle in Iran. And so I think that commitment – and I'm hopeful that that dialogue is productive. I worry about it a great deal if it's not.

MR. ALTERMAN: Last question right here.

Q: Jim Miklaszewski with NBC News. Admiral to follow up on both the questions from Martha and the ambassador, how confident are you that the U.S. forces – the Marines in particular – can launch this new operation in Southern Afghanistan for the first time in those kind of numbers; will, in fact, be able to "clear, hold and build?" And given the somewhat uncertainty we had in your answer to the ambassador about how soon Afghan forces would be ready, just how long are U.S. Marines going to have to be entrenched there in the South?

And one more part of that question: What in the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan will have to be sacrificed to pursue the "clear, hold and build" strategy?

ADM. MULLEN: Is that one question, or – (laughter).

MR. MIKLASZEWSKI: Well, I followed up on their two. And then my one.

(Laughter.)

MR. ALTERMAN: Would you like me to disallow it?

(Laughter.)

ADM. MULLEN: No, no, no. I think, Jim, that we have – that the analysis that underpinned the force levels for Afghanistan in the South, which is where the Marines are, was about right. So we've got the forces there we believe we need to both clear as well as hold. I mean, and the Marines are starting to do that as we speak. Again, I have confidence in that based on the analysis that occurred before we sent the Marines in. And before any of us asked for additional forces. And that all fits in to that I have confidence in the whole strategy – that we know how to do this.

So in addition to getting the numbers right – and I think that was one part of the question – the other one – do the Marines have enough to hold? Yes, they do. And then the last part is how this impacts on the totality of the Afghan-Pakistan – ?

MR. ALTERMAN: Pick one!

Q: (Inaudible, off mike) – will the Marines have to remain there until the Afghan security forces are at a proficient level to take over for the Marines? And then, does any part of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan have to be abandoned or suffer as a result of this new “clear, hold and build” strategy?

ADM. MULLEN: At least from what I've seen, I don't think the overall strategy suffers. I think, in fact, the overall strategy is enhanced by this. And then I get asked questions on time all the time. I think in Afghanistan, the timeframe that I speak to is – the trends have been negative for the last three-plus years in terms of levels of violence, the comprehensiveness of the insurgency.

The enemy's getting better and tougher. And we need to turn that around in the next 12 to 18 months – start to turn that around so the trends go in the other direction. So that we can provide not just the security but sustain it over time. And I think over the next couple of years, that's the timeframe that I worry about the most.

The additional 4,000 trainers that will show up later this year will dramatically impact the ramp-up for the Afghan police. How quickly, exactly – hard to say, sort of, until they get there. But we need to develop that capability on the police and the army side as rapidly as possible. And that's tied to some possibility, as asked earlier by Ambassador Neumann, that that overall requirement may go up here in the near future. It may not, but it may. So all those things are part of where we're focused right now.

MR. HAMRE: Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for joining us today, for answering the questions with such energy and directness. When I think about your schedule the last several days – doing all the Sunday talk shows and then being in Moscow yesterday and here today – I guess you're a young man so you can do that, but it makes me tired to just – (laughter) – think about it.

I think we're especially grateful to you, we're grateful to Ambassador Liteba (ph) and his staff.
Thank you for coming.

(Applause.)

(END)