

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LEON E. PANETTA  
SUBMITTED STATEMENT ON AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ  
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE  
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2011**

Chairman Levin, Senator McCain, members of this committee. It is an honor to appear before you today for the first time as Secretary of Defense, and to represent the men and women of the Department and our Armed Forces. I want to thank you, on their behalf, for your support in a time of war, and for your determination to join me in doing everything possible to ensure that they succeed in their mission of protecting America.

When I testified before this committee as nominee for Secretary of Defense, I pledged that I would treat Congress as a full partner. In the months since, I have consulted with you regularly about many of the challenges the Department faces and I will continue to do so.

Before turning to the most pressing of these challenges – the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – I would like to address another issue that I know is of great concern to members of the committee, the defense budget. As you know, the Department has been undergoing a strategy-driven process to prepare to implement the more than \$450 billion in savings that will be required of it over 10 years as a result of the debt ceiling agreement. While this review is ongoing and no decisions have been made, it is clear that achieving these savings will be very hard and require difficult tradeoffs for the Department and the country.

As we approach these decisions, I am determined to make them strategically, so that we maintain the most dominant military in the world – a force that is agile, ready, capable, and adaptable. We must preserve capabilities that are most important to protecting our vital interests, and we must avoid hollowing out the force and breaking faith with the men and women who are fighting for us. We have a strong military and strong national defense, but one that has been stressed by a decade of fighting, squeezed by rising personnel costs, and is in need of modernization given the focus the past decade on capabilities for ongoing wars. While the Department will look first to reduce overhead and duplication, make no mistake that the reductions will require hard decisions that will force us to take on greater risk in our mission to protect the country. My goal is to make that risk acceptable.

This Department is taking on its share of our country's efforts to achieve fiscal discipline, but I want to caution strongly against further cuts to defense, particularly through the mechanism known as sequester. This mechanism would force defense cuts that, in my view, would do catastrophic damage to our military and its ability to protect the country. I know you share my concern about sequester. Working with this committee and others in Congress, I am confident we can meet our national security responsibilities and do our part to help the country get its fiscal house in order.

Even as the Department looks to maintain the ability to protect our core national security interests over the long-term by making these budget decisions strategically, our most immediate challenges are the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today I will update you on the progress we are making in these efforts, and the challenges that remain to achieving our strategic objectives.

**Iraq**

Let me begin with Iraq, where our focus has been on ending the war in a responsible way that allows Iraq to become a sovereign, stable, self-reliant nation and a positive force for stability in the region. Given Iraq's importance, situated strategically in the Middle East, it is profoundly

in the American national interest that it emerge as a strategic partner for the United States, and our broader goal moving forward is to build an enduring partnership with the sovereign Iraqi government.

The fact that we are in a position to build this kind of relationship is a reflection of how much progress has been made over the past four years, and a tribute to the extraordinary sacrifices of our men and women in uniform and the Iraqi people, who have fought to build a stable and secure country. I visited Iraq in 2006 with the Iraq Study Group, at a time when the country was in considerable turmoil. Returning on several visits over the last two-and-a-half years, first as CIA Director and then as Secretary of Defense, the change in the situation on the ground has been profound.

Today fewer than 50,000 U.S. forces remain in Iraq, and based on the November 2008 Security Agreement reached with the Iraqi government under the last administration, we are planning to remove all of our troops from Iraq by the end of the year. Under the capable leadership of General Austin, we are moving ahead on implementing that agreement and withdrawing our forces. Still, as you know, last month the Iraqi political leadership indicated publicly that they are interested in an ongoing training relationship with the United States military post-2011. Since we believe a relationship with the ISF will be an important part of a broader enduring partnership with the Iraqi people, we are now negotiating with the Iraqi government about the future nature and scope of our military-to-military ties. While we are open to considering this request, no final decisions have been made, and we will continue to consult extensively with Congress before such decisions are made about a post-2011 training presence.

At the outset of these negotiations, it's important to make clear that any future security relationship with Iraq will be fundamentally different from the one that we have had since 2003. The United States wants a normal, productive relationship and close strategic partnership with a sovereign Iraqi government going forward – similar to the partnerships we have with other countries in the region and around the world.

Moreover, Iraq no longer needs large numbers of U.S. forces to maintain internal stability. We have drawn down more than 100,000 U.S. forces without a significant or sustained uptick in attacks, and with the ISF in the lead for security, levels of violence have remained dramatically reduced from where they were in 2006 and 2007. Our commanders in the field believe that the ISF are competent at conducting counter-insurgency operations, but that the Iraqis will have gaps in their ability to defend against external threats and in areas such as integrated air defense, intelligence sharing, and logistics. It is the Iraqi interest in filling these gaps that is guiding our conversations about a post-2011 training role. This kind of security assistance would be a means of furthering our strategic partnership with Iraq that looks to the kind of future role that can best address Iraq's security needs.

While Iraq today is closer than ever to being a stable and secure country, we are mindful of the challenges that remain to achieving our strategic objectives. The Iraqis are taking critical steps to resolve ongoing political issues, but internal divisions remain. For example, they still have to stand up the National Council for Higher Policies and implement other power sharing arrangements. The status of Kirkuk and the disputed territories also remains unresolved and they have yet to pass a Hydrocarbons law. These issues must be addressed to avoid potential conflicts, and Iraqi leaders are talking about ways to address these challenges. Regardless of DoD's post-2011 training role, our civilian mission will be focused on helping address these issues through a robust and representative political process, which is the best safeguard against a return to violence.

Another ongoing challenge in Iraq is the push for influence by Iran, and the activities of Iranian backed militias that have attacked United States forces and the Iraqi people. We take this issue very seriously, as does the Iraqi government, and the ISF have been more active and successful against this threat in recent months. We have also worked with the Iraqi government to conduct joint operations against Iranian-backed militias, and we reserve the right to take other steps as necessary and appropriate based on right of self-defense consistent with the security agreement we have with the Iraqi government – a point I made very clearly when I visited the country in July. Unlike Iran, the United States is working to build a safer and stronger Iraq, and it is that shared interest that gives me confidence we can build an enduring partnership with the Iraqi government.

### **Afghanistan**

As we have moved decisively since 2009 to end the war in Iraq, we have also turned attention, focus and resources to Afghanistan, which has become our military's main operational effort. The core goal of President Obama's strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda, to deny it safe haven in the region, and to prevent it from again attacking the United States and our allies, as it did on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Earlier this month, in observances large and small, the nation came together to mark the ten year anniversary of that horrific attack – one planned and directed by al-Qaeda from the safe haven they were afforded in Afghanistan by the Taliban government.

In our determined response to September 11<sup>th</sup>, our military quickly toppled the Taliban regime and drove al-Qaeda's leadership from the country. But in the ensuing years, as the war in Iraq drew attention and resources, we lost our focus and allowed the Taliban and insurgents to regroup and threaten to topple Afghanistan's legitimate government – a recipe for regenerating the conditions that enabled the planning and execution of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

Although we have achieved significant success in weakening al-Qaeda, particularly with the operation that took down Bin Laden, and the threat from al-Qaeda and violent extremism has spread to new geographical centers such as Yemen, Somalia, and North Africa, a central part of the mission to defeat al-Qaeda remains our effort to build a stable and secure Afghanistan that does not provide them safe haven. Under President Obama's strategy, this effort finally has had the resources and focus needed to achieve these objectives. It also has an extraordinary leadership team in General Allen and Ambassador Crocker, who this summer assumed lead of our military and civilian efforts.

This has been a difficult fight for our country, our coalition partners, and the Afghan people. Significant challenges remain. But, because of the hard work and sacrifices of Afghan and coalition forces we have established conditions that are putting Afghans on a path to assume lead responsibility for security nationwide by the end of 2014. The insurgency has been turned back in much of the country, including its heartland in the south, and Afghan National Security Forces are increasingly strong and capable.

This undeniable progress allowed us to begin transitioning to Afghan security control in seven areas of the country in July. As a result, nearly 25 percent of the Afghan population now lives in areas of the country where Afghan forces have the lead responsibility for security. As this transition commenced, we began implementing the responsible drawdown that is essential to the success of that transition process, and the lasting security and stability in Afghanistan. The drawdown of the surge forces began on schedule with July's redeployment of two Army

National Guard battalions. Through the remainder of this year, a total of 10,000 troops will redeploy, and another 23,000 troops will come home by the end of summer 2012.

This is a measured drawdown of our surge forces that provides our commanders with the right mix of flexibility, resources, and time to continue building on our progress on the ground. The reduction in roughly 33,000 American personnel takes place as we are adding more than 50,000 new personnel to the Afghan National Security Forces. That means by the time we have finished drawing down our surge forces, the insurgents will face more forces than they did during this summer's fighting season—and substantially more of those forces will be Afghan.

The development of the Afghan National Security Forces over the past two years has been one of the most notable successes of the campaign, and it has only been possible with the solid support of Congress—especially the leadership and members of this committee. Surveys conducted regularly for ISAF now show that 86% of the Afghan population see their local shuras and village elders, the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army as bringing the most security to their areas. The police and army achieved their respective October 2011 growth targets of 134,000 and 171,600 personnel ahead of schedule, and they are already moving out on their respective October 2012 targets of 157,000 and 195,000 toward a total force of 352,000.

This growth in numbers occurs as we continue to strengthen the emphasis on quality. The NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan has completed the establishment of all 12 branch schools where Afghans are now developing key enabling capabilities in logistics, engineering, medical, intelligence, signals, and other specialty disciplines. Together with steady growth in the officer and non-commissioned officer ranks, as well as the experience gained through partnered operations with coalition forces, Afghan units continue to improve their ability to carry out operations with decreasing levels of advice and assistance.

Despite this progress, we recognize the work that remains before us in developing the Afghan National Security Forces. Attrition rates in particular have remained too high—sometimes as much as three percent per month. Although some of these personnel subsequently return to the force, overall attrition still impedes the development of experience and leadership that are essential to force professionalization.

Likewise, we know that the long-term sustainment of these forces will outstrip Afghanistan's own resources and will require continued support from the United States and our international partners for years to come. Given our growing budgetary constraints, we need to ensure that our support for the Afghan National Security Forces is fiscally sustainable at home. To that end, already we are looking at where we can take additional steps to reduce the costs of these force development efforts.

Even as the growth in the credibility and capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces are allowing a responsible transition to proceed, another critical component of a durable transition will be for the United States to address concerns about America's long-term commitment to Afghanistan's security and stability. To that end, we are putting into place the long-term architecture that will support and sustain security and stability in the region beyond 2014. This Strategic Partnership Declaration, which the Department of State is working with the Afghans to develop, is a framework of mutual commitments that will help focus the sovereign efforts Afghanistan will take in the years ahead to develop its government, expand its economy and improve its security.

While my overall assessment is that our effort in Afghanistan is heading in the right direction, we must also take a clear-eyed look at the challenges ahead.

First, as the Taliban lost control of territory last year, as expected, they shifted away from large attacks on our forces to greater reliance on improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide attacks, assassinations, and headline-grabbing attacks. In recent weeks we've seen a spate of such high-profile attacks, including the attempt to attack the United States embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul last week and the assassination of former President Rabbani, the Chairman of the High Peace Council, on Tuesday. At this time of loss, I want to extend my condolences to the family of Professor Rabbani and the Afghan people. We're concerned about these attacks because of the loss of life and because they represent an effort to disrupt the progress we have made. These kinds of attacks were not unexpected and we have been able to prevent the vast majority of the Taliban's efforts to carry them out.

Overall, we judge this change in tactics to be a result of a shift in momentum in our favor and a sign of weakness in the insurgency. Still, these attacks show the adaptability of the insurgents and can have powerful psychological effects on the Afghan people and on public sentiment in coalition nations, creating the appearance of increased violence and insecurity, even when the opposite is increasingly true. While overall violence in Afghanistan is trending down—and down substantially in areas where we concentrated our surge—we must be more effective in stopping these attacks and limiting the ability of insurgents to create perceptions of decreasing security. We are working with our Afghan counterparts to discuss with them how we can provide better protection against these attacks. But the bottom line is that we can't let these sporadic events deter us from the progress that we've made.

Second, we have a difficult campaign ahead of us in the east, where the topography, cultural geography, and continuing presence of safe havens in Pakistan give the insurgents advantages they have lost elsewhere in the country. Additionally, as relations with Pakistan have become strained over the past year, and as we have met Pakistan's requests to reduce our training and liaison presence in their country, our diminished ability to coordinate respective military operations in the border regions has given insurgents greater freedom of movement along the border. Our forces are working in the east to cut off insurgent lines of communication and deny their ability to threaten Kabul and other population centers. Nonetheless, progress in the east will likely continue to lag what we see elsewhere in the country.

Third, we must not underestimate the difficult tasks the Afghans still face in developing governance that can meet the minimum needs of the Afghan people and help them take and sustain control of their country. Over ten years, our military has learned that one indispensable element of modern counterinsurgency warfare is civilian partners who bring skills and capabilities beyond the expertise of our military. The Department of Defense is working hard with the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and other civilian agencies on these challenges. I appreciate the efforts this committee has already made, and would ask for your continued support in working together with those agencies' oversight committees to ensure that our civilian partners have the authorities and resources they need to succeed in this mission.

While these challenges are considerable, I believe that we are capable of meeting them, if we keep our efforts focused and maintain our dedication to this fight. We have had some tough days in this campaign, and undoubtedly many more lie ahead. This is a heavy burden that I feel personally as Secretary of Defense every time I write a condolence letter. Since taking this office, I've gone out to the war zones, and looked the troops in the eye. I've been to Bethesda and to Walter Reed and seen those who have been terribly wounded as a result of the wars. I've

been to Dover to receive the remains of those who were killed in the Chinook helicopter crash. And I've been to Arlington.

The greatest inspiration to me has been that, in spending time with the families of those who have died in the service of their country there isn't a family member that hasn't come up to me and said, if you really care about what happened to my loved one, you will carry on the mission that they gave their life for. We owe it to those who have paid this price to continue the hard work of protecting our country, and its interests, in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I would like to close by recognizing the man sitting next to me here, Admiral Mullen. He has worked tirelessly and successfully to advocate for a greater focus on operations in Afghanistan, and the strategy that is now bearing fruit owes much of its success to his vision and determination. I know that you join me in thanking Admiral Mullen for his decades of dedicated service, and his extraordinary work on behalf of our country and our men and women in uniform. Mike has set a standard for the responsibilities and performance of Chairman that will forever be his legacy.

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