

Opening Statement on Worldwide Threats
Chairman John McCain
February 9, 2016

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on the global threats faced by the United States and our allies, as part of our oversight of the President's defense budget request for Fiscal Year 2017.

I'd like to welcome back Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, General Vincent Stewart. As this is likely his final appearance before this Committee at our annual world wide threats hearing, I would like to thank Director Clapper for over five decades of service to protecting our country. In particular, we thank you for leading the men and women who strive every day to collect and analyze the information that helps keep America strong. Thank you both for being with us today.

The list of the threats confronting our nation is drearily familiar. Yet it is impossible to say we have seen much improvement.

- In Afghanistan, 9,800 American troops are still in harm's way. The Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Haqqani Network continue to threaten our interests in Afghanistan and beyond. And now ISIL has arrived on the battlefield, raising the specter of yet another ISIL safe to plan and execute attacks.
- Regional order in the Middle East is breaking down. And this power vacuum is being filled by the most extreme and anti-American of forces—Sunni terrorist groups such as ISIL and al-Qaeda, Shiite extremists such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies, and the imperial ambitions of Vladimir Putin.
- ISIL has consolidated control over key territories in Syria and Iraq. It is metastasizing around the region and expanding globally, from Afghanistan, as I said, as well as to Lebanon, Yemen, Egypt, and most worryingly to Libya. It has also conducted or inspired attacks from Beirut to Istanbul, Paris to San Bernardino. More than a year into our military campaign against ISIL, it is impossible to say ISIL is losing and we are winning.
- At the same time, Iran continues to challenge regional order in the Middle East by developing a ballistic missile capability, supporting terrorism, training and arming pro-Iranian militant groups, and engaging in other

malign activities in places such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, Bahrain, and Yemen. As the Islamic Republic receives tens of billions of dollars in sanctions relief from the nuclear deal, these activities will only increase.

- Russia annexed Crimea and continues to destabilize Ukraine, with troubling implications for security in Europe. And Putin's intervention in Syria has undermined negotiations to end the conflict by convincing Assad and his allies they can win.
- In Asia, North Korea continues to develop its nuclear arsenal and ever-more capable ballistic missiles, one of which it tested this weekend in violation of multiple UN Security Council resolutions.
- China continues its rapid military modernization while taking coercive actions to assert expansive territorial claims. At the time of this hearing last year, China had reclaimed a total of 400 acres in the Spratly Islands. Today that figure is a staggering 3,200 acres, with extensive infrastructure construction underway or already complete.

I look forward to our witnesses' assessments of the nature and scope of these challenges and how the intelligence community prioritizes and approaches the diverse and complex threats we face. As policy makers, we look to the Intelligence Community to provide timely and accurate information about the nature of the threats we face and the intentions of our adversaries.

We have high expectations of our intelligence community, as we should, and as they do of themselves. However, we cannot afford to believe that our intelligence agencies are omniscient and omnipresent, especially after years of sequestration and arbitrary budget caps that have damaged our nation's intelligence every bit as much as they have the rest of our national defense.

Unfortunately, this misperception is only fed by the prideful assertions of politicians seeking to justify their policies. For example, during the Iran deal, we were told that the United States has, quote, "[absolute knowledge](#)" about Iran's nuclear military activities. We were told that the deal, quote, "[absolutely guarantee\[s\]](#)" that we will know if Iran cheats and pursues a nuclear weapon. This hubris is dangerously misleading and compromises the integrity of our debate over important questions of U.S. national security policy.

Americans must know that intelligence is not like in the movies. Although our intelligence professionals are the best in the world, there will not always be a satellite in position or a drone overhead, and not every terrorist phone call will be intercepted. Whether it is Russian military activities on the borders of NATO, or the movement of terrorist groups across the world, or any of the other number of hard targets that we expect our intelligence community to penetrate and understand, we will not always know how our adversaries make decisions, let alone understand their implications.

This is doubly true if we further constrain our nation's intelligence professionals through policy decisions that limit their effectiveness. Our intelligence capacity and capability are just like anything else – constrained by the limitations of time, space, technology, resources, and policy. As one senior U.S. official acknowledged about limited understanding of ISIL two years ago, quote, “a lot of the [intelligence] collection that we were receiving diminished significantly following the U.S. withdrawal in Iraq in 2011, when we lost some of the ‘boots on the ground’ view of what was going on.” Put simply, if our national leaders decide not to be present in places, we should not be surprised later when we lack sufficient intelligence about the threats and dangers that are emerging there.

As we receive this important intelligence update today, we must remember that it is the responsibility of policy makers, from the White House to the Pentagon to here on Capitol Hill, to invest in cutting-edge capabilities that can provide early indication and warning, as well as to provide our intelligence professionals with sound policy decisions and support—including, at times, military support—that enable them to perform their often dangerous and always important work on behalf of our nation. If we fail to make these commitments, we will continue to be surprised by events at an ever increasing cost to our national security.