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Chairman Discusses Risk Assessments

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HONOLULU, Feb. 20, 2008 – The United States will continue to face military risks even when the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan end, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said yesterday.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, in an interview while on a six-day trip to California, Hawaii and Australia, shared the philosophy he applies to assessing military risks.

First, he said, he constantly assesses the readiness of troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. “It impacts overall readiness, equipment readiness and people,” he noted.

Second, the admiral said, he speaks with the service chiefs about readiness. He said that Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr. and Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James T. Conway “have expressed concerns – which I share – about full-spectrum training and that we need to broaden the capabilities for which we are training right now.”

Finally, Mullen said, he stays in constant contact with the combatant commanders to solicit their views about the missions they must carry out around the world and the resources they will need. The missions range from military-to-military engagement to training, right up to carrying out war plans should the situation call for it, the admiral said.

The chairman said his assessment of risk “is made in terms of what we’re ready for and tied to that is the probability of what’s the likely occurrence,” he said. For example, he said, the likelihood that the United States would field a ground force in some other areas right now is “pretty slim.” This doesn’t mean the U.S. military couldn’t do it, he emphasized, but simply means it is not likely.

Another aspect of the chairman’s assessment process centers on consequences and mitigating them. Assessing readiness is not just about Army brigade combat teams, Marine battalions and other mainstream military capabilities, the admiral said.

“Because we’ve got 80 percent of our Special Forces in Central Command, there’s a lot of Special Forces work that they’ve been doing for years in other parts of the world that just isn’t getting done. That builds risk over time, and we have to assess that.”

Even when major operations in Iraq and Afghanistan finish, the Middle East and Central Asia will remain an unstable part of the world, Mullen said. Further, “if I were to magically wave a wand and get everybody back from Iraq and Afghanistan,” he added, “it’s still going to take a while to reset. It will take some time to reset the Army and a shorter time to reset the Marine Corps.”

Resetting doesn’t mean just mean replacing equipment and enhancing training, the chairman explained. It also means giving soldiers and Marines well-earned rest.

Contributions from allies and other U.S. government agencies also play a significant part in assessing and mitigating risks, Mullen said.

Noting that dealing with risks facing the nation involves more than bringing the military’s capabilities to bear, Mullen said he fully agrees with Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates’ emphasis on the importance of “soft power” -- diplomacy, humanitarian aid and economic and political efforts.

“No one can do it alone any more, especially us,” he said. We’ve got to do it together.”