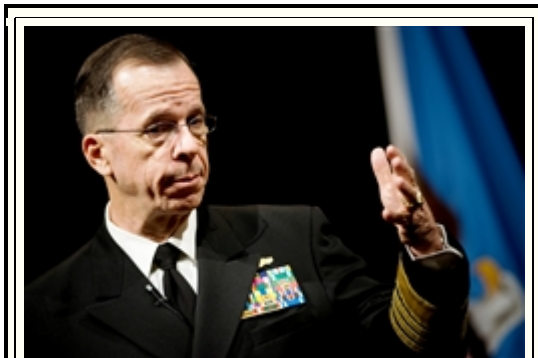




Mullen Says Rapid Withdrawal From Iraq Would Negate Security Gains

By Jim Garamone
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 28, 2008 – A precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Iraq not based on conditions on the ground would turn around all the gains the coalition has made in the country, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said here today.



U.S. Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conducts an all-hands call with Joint Staff members at the Pentagon on Feb. 28, 2008. Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley, USN

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen told reporters following an all-hands meeting with the Joint Staff that the military must be prepared “across the board” for what any new president would bring.

“I wouldn’t be predictive of who that would be, nor would I be specifically predictive of what decisions ... that individual may make,” Mullen said.

“I do worry about a rapid withdrawal ... in a situation that wouldn’t call for that in terms of the conditions on the ground, which would then ... basically turn around the gains we have ... struggled to achieve and turn them around overnight,” he said.

While he would advise against any such withdrawal not indicated by conditions in the country, he said he firmly believes in civilian control of the military. “When a new president comes, I’ll get my orders and carry them out,” the chairman said.

Mullen said he continues to be concerned about the Turkish incursion in northern Iraq. Turkey is pursuing PKK guerillas -- Kurdish terrorists that are using areas in the northern part of Iraq as safe havens from which they launch attacks into Turkey.

“We’ve engaged the leaders of Turkey,” Mullen said. He said his Turkish counterpart, Gen. Yasar Buyukanit, him that the incursion is for a limited duration and very specifically focused on the PKK.

The incursion comes at a very sensitive time in Iraq, Mullen said. "We're very worried that it could tip the balance in the wrong direction," Mullen said. "So it is a very delicate balance, but the leadership of the Turkish government, in particular the military, has assured me that they will limit it. And although they haven't said, 'This is the date' (they will leave), we'd like that to happen as soon as possible."

Speaking of U.S. military force levels in Iraq, Mullen said he doesn't know how long a pause there would be after the last of the surge brigades withdraws in July. He wants to wait to see what commanders in Iraq and at U.S. Central Command recommend before providing his advice to the defense secretary and president. The length of the pause before more soldiers return to the United States will impact soldiers' tour lengths and the move in the Defense Department and the Army to reduce soldiers' tours in Iraq from 15 months to 12.

Bringing the tour lengths down will be tough, but it is something that must happen, Mullen said. "It's this very, very delicate balance between continuing to make progress in Iraq, to resource what we need to do in Afghanistan, and to give the troops a break after a long demanding time at war," he said. "We're going to continue to be engaged. I'm hopeful the optempo will go down a bit."

Turning to Afghanistan, Mullen said the training mission there is the top priority. "The Afghan army is developing," he said. "We're working to bring the Afghan police on. We need more trainers than anything else."

The combat mission will remain, but trainers are the long-term solution to the security situation in the country. However, before more trainers can go to Afghanistan, there has to be a reduction in troops committed to Iraq, the admiral said. "It will take forces drawing down in Iraq to provide the headroom to meet that mission," he said.