
Chairman Says He is Ready to Execute New President's Military Decisions

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Whatever decisions President-elect Barack Obama makes regarding Iraq and Afghanistan, the military is prepared to carry them out, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said in an interview last night on the CBS TV show "60 Minutes."

When President-elect Obama gets in and says, Here is the decision, the United States military, led by me, is going to march off and execute that decision, Navy Admiral Mike Mullen told correspondent David Martin.

Should that decision be to withdraw troops from Iraq, as Obama stated he would in campaign addresses, it is up to Mullen to tell the new President what it will take. Before Christmas, the Chairman visited the front lines in Iraq to determine for himself what it will take to get 140,000 troops out of the country gracefully. "I don't think it's 'Mission Impossible,'" Mullen said, noting that the President-elect has said consistently that he wants to withdraw troops responsibly. "Certainly, a responsible withdrawal is, I think, a very, very possible outcome here, given what I have seen transpire over the last couple of years and literally what I saw walking the streets of Samarra," the Chairman said.

Samarra is home to the al-Askari Mosque, a Shia Muslim shrine also known as "the Golden Mosque." The February 2006 bombing of the mosque sparked sectarian violence that nearly tore Iraq apart. The structure is now being rebuilt.

Mullen also made his way to Afghanistan during his pre-holiday trip, and he said he stands by his earlier assessment that "we are not winning" the war there. "I said it because I believed it, and I still believe it," he said. "I think the level of violence in 2008 surprised us all. The sophistication of the tactics of the insurgency surprised us all. A possible answer to the upswing in violence in Afghanistan includes more troops on the ground," he said. "The exact number isn't known," he acknowledged. "I talked . . . about a range between 20,000 and 30,000."

That would nearly double the number of troops fighting the insurgency in Afghanistan. But even increased troop numbers won't do any good unless the insurgent safe haven in Pakistan is mitigated, the Admiral said. Pakistan shares a border with Afghanistan, and Taliban extremists have been using safe havens within Pakistan to plan and train for attacks inside Afghanistan.

That safe haven has got to be shut down to a level where it does not have the effect that it is having now, Mullen said. In the long run, if that is not done, then additional troops are not going to have that big an impact.

Mullen said he makes a point of meeting with his Pakistani counterpart whenever he is in the area, including this past trip. This visit marked his seventh visit to the country since he took office in October 2007. "It's a critical relationship," Mullen said, adding that relations with the country are equal to, if not more important than, those with any other country right now.

“The relationship between the new President and the military he will command also is critical,” Mullen said. The Chairman met with Obama in Chicago shortly after the election at the President-elect’s request.

As Commander in Chief, the connection with the military is absolutely vital, he said. So making that connection as early as possible and as solid as possible is a huge deal.

Mullen said he does not sense any hesitancy from the military over the incoming President. “What is really important about us in the military is that we stay neutral and remain apolitical,” he said. “We work for whoever the President is. All of us in the military will do that faithfully to support President [George W.] Bush until the 20th of January, and we will do the same thing for President-elect Obama once he gets into the position.”