

BRUSSELS FORUM 2009

Networking Dinner

The Hon. John McCain

Member, U.S. Senate

In the aftermath of the Second World War, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, as we know, developed a new conception of national security. One that rested not solely on the shifting tectonic plates of geopolitics or the narrowly construed interests of the individual nations. There was a vision of transatlantic security rooted in an alliance of liberal democracies that shared the will and means their interests and values against all external threats.

The decades, indeed the 60 years since this unique relationship, as we all know, has transformed the world. Our pact in anchoring our economies and safety and stability helped bring about an era of unprecedented human progress.

And yet, for all the opportunity and promise that continues to exist in our world, there also exists real threats to our future and I'd like to discuss with you one central task that faces all of us, both individually and collectively - the critical need to prevail in Afghanistan. Make no mistake, make no mistake, we can and must win the war in Afghanistan but we will fail without a new strategy and the increased resources necessary to carry it out.

The situation on the ground has reached stalemate at best and most important indicators from the reach of the insurgency to violence against civilians to corruption and the narcotics trade are pointing in the wrong direction. With a new American administration and new resolve on both sides of the Atlantic, the 60th Anniversary NATO Summit next month offers the allies an opportunity to recommit in Afghanistan. We must seize that chance. If we do not, we risk the reversion of that country to a terrorist safe haven, a terrible setback in the global war against the jihadist movement and an historic defeat, I repeat, an historic defeat for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Success, which is a stable, secure, self-governing Afghanistan that is not a terrorist sanctuary, can be achieved but it requires a new strategy. The Obama administration is currently reviewing options for just such a fresh strategy. I am concerned however by calls in some quarters, both in Washington and in Europe, for the coalition to adopt a minimalist approach to Afghanistan. Supporters of this course caution that our citizens are tired of war and that an ambitious long term commitment to Afghanistan may be politically unfeasible. They've warned that Afghanistan has always been a graveyard of empires, that the country has never been governable. Instead, they suggest we can protect our vital national interests in Afghanistan even while lowering our objectives and accepting more realistic goals there, for instance, by scaling back our long term commitment to help the Afghan people build a better future in favour of a short term course on fighting terrorists.

The political lure of such a reductionist approach is obvious but it's also dangerously and fundamentally wrong and leaders on both sides of the Atlantic should decisively and unambiguously reject it. Just as in Iraq, there is no short cut to success in Afghanistan. No clever middle way that allows us to achieve more by doing less. A minimalist approach is a recipe not for winning smarter but losing slowly and at tremendous cost in lives, treasure and security.

There is no question that our nations share a vital interest in preventing Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for terrorists to plan attacks against our people. By achieving this narrow counterterrorism objective requires us to carry out a far broader set of tasks, the foremost of which is providing basic security for the Afghan population, nurturing legitimate and effective governance, and fostering legitimate economic development.

In short, we need a robust, sustained, and comprehensive civil military counterinsurgency approach backed by greatly increased resources and an unambiguous political commitment to success in Afghanistan over the long haul. A narrow, short term focus on counterterrorism, by contrast, would repeat precisely the mistakes that we, the United States, made for years in Iraq prior to the surge with the same catastrophic consequences.

I'd like to remind you that before 2007 in Iraq, American Special Forces had complete freedom of action to strike at terrorist leaders and they were backed by more than 120,000 conventional American forces and overwhelming air power and we succeeded in killing countless terrorists including the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq. The insurgency continued to grow in strength and violence. It was not until we changed course and applied a new approach, a counterinsurgency strategy focused on providing basic security for the people and improving their lives that the cycle of violence was at last broken.

The best way to generate the intelligence necessary for successful counterterrorism operations and to split reconcilable insurgents from their irreconcilable brethren is to

show the Afghan civilian population that we are on their side, committed to staying and protecting them. Security is the precondition for progress in other areas and for further progress in the security arena itself.

As the Afghan Ambassador to the United States observed in a recent speech, and I quote, "Negotiation and reconciliation with the Taliban will succeed only if we talk to them from the position of strength and with a clear and strong stand on human rights, women's rights and the Afghan constitution."

NATO and U.S. forces are saying that we are not winning in Afghanistan implying that the Taliban are not losing. If they're not losing why should they talk to us? That is why it's so important for us to reject the temptations of minimalism in Afghanistan and instead adopt a fully resourced, comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy backed by an unambiguous commitment to success there over the long term. Only this will enable us to turn the tide to embark on a path of successful reconciliation and augur the day when our fighting men and women can withdraw from that country in success.

By the same token, by the same token, we must level with our citizens about just how difficult this journey to that day will be and potentially how far off. While we must be confident that we can prevail in Afghanistan, we must also know that the going will be exceedingly hard, that the violence will likely get worse before it gets better, that the scale of resources required will be enormous and that the timetable will be measured in years not months. It is important to speak frankly of these matters. If we do not we face a collapse of public support for these vital efforts sooner rather than later.

Our words also resonate in the very region we are trying to affect. Rhetoric about trimming our sails in Afghanistan or that diminishes the importance of success there exacerbates suspicions already widespread in South Asia that we will tire of this war and that we will retreat from it. These doubts about our staying power deter ordinary Afghans from siding with our coalition against the insurgency.

Just as importantly, they are a major reason why some in Pakistan are reluctant to break decisively with insurgent groups which they view as integral to a hedging strategy in order to position Pakistan for influence the day after the international community gives up and leaves.

As we recommit to Afghanistan we should take great care to ensure that our occasional differences do not cloud our collective will to prevail there. In recent years, our alliance diplomacy has led to frustration on both sides of the Atlantic. As the United States has increased the number of troops it contributes to the fight and asks the allies to match our efforts, it has grown frustrated with some allies' refusal to do so. On the other side, our allies have expressed that their contributions have gone

unappreciated and that haranguing from Washington only makes the war less popular at home.

While I believe the United States should continue to invite European troop contributions and press to reduce restrictions on their use, I also believe we should move away from stressing what Washington wants Europe to give and make greater use of what Europe itself is prepared to contribute. In many areas non-combat related contributions from police training to a trust fund for the Afghan national army, which will have to be doubled and even tripled, will be necessary as success as more European troops would be.

To communicate both the vitally important interests in Afghanistan and the tremendous resources need to secure them, requires leadership on both sides of the Atlantic, leadership commensurate with that provided by the statesmen who built the post-war world and recognized how stubbornly we must guard our interests and ideals in a hostile world.

The challenge of Afghanistan, like others we face today, reminds us that a global order of peace rooted in liberal conceptions that allow the flourishing of human potential has always been worth defending. We cannot afford a crisis of confidence. We must accept the responsibilities history has assigned us and our mutual interests require. We must do the hard work as we always have of building a stable and prosperous world order in which ever increasing numbers of human beings can flourish in peace, security and opportunity.

We've achieved great things in the past, we will achieve greater things still, but only if we keep our faith and accept the burden of being indispensable to the global success of our shared values and interests and the progress of humanity.

Thank you very much. I look forward to answering any questions you might have.

Q&A Session

From the floor

Senator McCain, we just heard the panel about what happened 20 years ago --

John McCain

The question is they just had very interesting panel, which I observed, about 20 years ago, the Cold War. I have very mixed emotions, a lot of emotions about it as we all

do because for those people of my vintage it's still very recent in our memories, the exuberance and joy that who saw the Berlin Wall come down. I think also though history may look at it as a lost opportunity. To wit some of the comments made by the Russian Foreign Minister this morning.

I think that maybe we expected too much too fast from the Russians who were never accustomed to any kind of democratic government or representative government. So I guess I think it was one of the seminal moments of the 20th and 21st century but I also wish this movie had had a better sequel.

From the floor

Senator, I have one question, Erika Mann from the European Parliament. You spoke about Afghanistan and you mentioned Pakistan. Now, I was in the Taj Hotel when the terrorists attacked and as we know now, it was confirmed and is confirmed now, actually all the tens which were caught, one survived, are from Pakistan. What do you think, and I'm [passing] always about, I go back and forward to India and I understand India pretty well and I know the conflict and of course we know the conflict in Kashmir.

But what do you think if we cannot solve the effects and that's what I hear from my Indian friends quite often, that the West is completely overlooking the factor which plays into Indian politics and what would you say, what could be helpful to, I don't know, I wouldn't want to - it's probably too much to ask to solve this situation but how can we analyze it and better react to it?

John McCain

I'll try to make my answer brief because your question is very important and vital to success in Afghanistan as we know. But the first thing we ought to recognize is we ought not to have a policy towards Pakistan that's important to Afghanistan. We ought to have a policy towards Pakistan that places Pakistan in the relative importance that they're in; a nuclear power nation, a nation that is struggling right now with various factions, which as we all know, the back and forth between military rule and coups and frankly, a failed state situation which existed when the military took over.

I think we have to make a long term commitment to Pakistan, both in every aid and assistance of every kind. I know they're in an economic crisis right now. I'm pleased that the new head of the military, Kiyani, is I think a person of exceptional ability. I also have great respect for Zardari and others. But we must develop a strategy that's directly related to Pakistan and that we're in for a long term commitment. One of my great regrets was a period of time thanks to a thing called the Pressler Amendment we had a great vacancy of relations overall with Pakistan which led to a total lapse of military to military relations which we're paying a penalty for.

All I can say is that if we develop a policy for Pakistan about Pakistan not about Pakistan that's about Afghanistan then I think we can succeed. But it's also very important that we do everything we can to continue cooperation with Pakistan in those areas.

And finally, could I just remind you that Iran was causing trouble for us in Iraq as well when we fought the war there. So it's not an insurmountable obstacle but it's Pakistan's continuance as a functioning democracy is vital to American national security interests with or without the Afghan relationship.

From the floor

I'm [Gunther Berr] from Belgium. You have the reputation of being tough on Russia and certainly on human rights and democracy points. Now at last session, Minister Schäuble proposed to include Russian into NATO maybe on the short term or the long term, that was not clear. What do you think of that proposal?

John McCain

Well, I heard that conversation. I think that if Russia, there are certain requirements for entrance into NATO and one of them is that they be a functioning democracy. I'm not sure that Russia would meet some of the requirements fundamentally for membership. I think the Russia NATO Council is something that we should support and continue dialogue but I would be reluctant to endorse Russian membership under the circumstance in which government -- the Russian government is functioning today.

From the floor

Charles Grant from the Centre for European Reform. During the presidential election campaign your attitude to the Iranian nuclear program was rather different from that of Barack Obama's. Now that he is reaching out to the Iranians, I'd like to know what you think about his strategy. And do you think that the combination of bigger sticks and bigger carrots can succeed in persuading the Iranians to change course? In particular, do you think the Russians can help and wish to help on that particular problem?

John McCain

I think the Russians can help. I have not seen any concrete action on the part by the Russians to help with the issue of the Iranian nuclear build up. I was not surprised but disappointed by the Iranian to the President's outreach today. It was also interesting who made the response, it wasn't Ahmadinejad. It was the real ruler of Iran. I think that there's a careful balance between communication and dialogue and giving legitimacy to countries and governments that are not democratic and espouse certain

positions which are dangerous to world peace such as the Iranian's continued commitment to "wiping Israel off the map."

So I think there's plenty of room for dialogue. There's forums like these actually. There's plenty of room for dialogue and discussion between ourselves and the Iranians. Those can take place and if progress is made then they can continue. But I have seen no sign nor has the IAEA of any slackening of the Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons. I have seen repression of the moderates and we have continued to see the Iranians export lethal weapons into Iraq that kills young Americans and young Iraqis. Very interesting little anecdote the other day, the shoot-down of an Iranian UAV over Iraqi territory. Very interesting little incident.

So look, I think that one of the greatest threats to world peace is the Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons. We need to explore every option to try to bring about a cessation of those activities and so I'm open to any proposal. But I don't want to legitimize people on the world stage without the certainty that there's going to be some favourable result.

And finally now, I see my friend President Saakashvili here. I worry a great deal about continued Russian failure to comply with the Sarkozy brokered peace agreement in Georgia. It's very dangerous in my view to allow such activities to continue in violation of commitments that they made and I still hope that we will publicly commit to democracy in Georgia, Ukraine and other areas that the Russian foreign ministers seem to indicate they believe is in the Russian sphere of influence.

We want freedom and democracy for every nation in the world. We want it without confrontation. We want it without conflict but we cannot abandon our adherence to it. Thank you very much.

Press Conference

John McCain

Good evening. Thank you. I'm ready for your questions.

From the floor

Senator, what is your position on the use of air strikes against targets in Pakistan, even if they would be expanded, as has been reported right now, to places like Qatar?

John McCain

I am not privy to the exact arrangements or the communications between the Coalition in Afghanistan and the Pakistani government. But it is published information that there is information exchanged on that targeting. So it's pretty clear that this is a very careful operation because even though you may succeed in taking out some identified enemy, you also have to be careful of the public relations backlash when innocent civilians are either killed or wounded. And so it's my understanding that these operations are selected with great care and are extremely high-value. But I have not the intelligence information, nor have I been informed exactly how all that takes place, except for the published reports that there is information sharing between the government of Pakistan and the Coalition forces in Afghanistan.

From the floor

Senator, I think we met once at [Zelam] Airport in '73. You were a prisoner of war, at least, and I was a journalist.

John McCain

You don't look that old.

From the floor

Sir, at that time, the world was very sharply divided. Since then, it has changed but the dividing lines stay. Sir, the first question, do you think that only Russia is to blame for this situation? All the Western democratic countries have missed something, too. And what is your recipe to prevail in this situation, to soften these dividing lines?

John McCain

Well, I don't "blame Russia" in this respect. I don't think it would be helpful for US/Russia relations for me to start saying that Russia is to blame for everything. I mentioned in my comments a little while earlier that maybe we will look back on the period of the collapse of the then Soviet Union for that period of a decade or so that we may have missed opportunities, both on the Russian side and on the European and US side, maybe by having too-high expectations for how the Russian government and people would adapt to the institutions of democracy. So I'm not trying to blame Russia, because I do take exception to some Russian actions, including not adhering to the agreement that President Sarkozy entered into with the Russians to bring about the cessation of hostilities in Georgia.

I think that there are other activities and rhetoric that the Russians have engaged in which I don't think are helpful. At the same time, we need to continue the dialogue. And I want to emphasise, I do not see a re-ignition of the Cold War. You saw me in 1973. There was the risk of nuclear exchanges, we know. I do not see a re-ignition of the Cold War. I see friction in relations between Russia, the United States and Europe.

But I still believe that many of these issues can be resolved by dialogue, by the various means that we have of communicating with one another. The world, as you said, has dramatically changed since 1973. It's for the better. We have issues between ourselves and the Russians. I don't see that those issues can't be resolved over time.

Robert Marquand – Christian Science Monitor

When you talk about the problem of a minimalist Afghan commitment, could you say a little bit more about that, because who are you actually criticising? Barak Obama is sending 17,000 more troops in. That's certainly more than we had before. What is minimalist about that?

John McCain

Well, I don't think that it's very well known that there is a group, both here on this side of the Atlantic, as well as on the other side that basically says, "We ought to go in. We ought to get rid of as many terrorists as we can, do the minimum and get out of there." And part of that is in response to public opinion. Part of it is due to other factors, such as a belief that if the government isn't functioning effectively, that somehow we will muddle through. So it is well known that there is great debate within the administration.

I applauded the dispatch of 17,000 troops, but I have to give you a little straight talk, my friend. It is going to take a lot more than 17,000 troops. It's going to require a number more than that. It is going to require more than doubling the size of the Afghan Army. It is going to require operations which will entail increased loss of American blood and treasure. That's why I emphasise that we have got to tell the American people what is at stake and that it is a long, hard haul.

From the floor

Senator, Foreign Minister Lavrov today suggested that NATO should be replaced with the OSCE. I was wondering what you feel about that.

And also, what do you think this new fresh start with Russia should look like, that the Obama Administration is trying to pursue, especially when it comes to Eastern European countries and their security interests? Thank you.

John McCain

I think NATO has a role in the world. And we've proven that in places like Kosovo and in Afghanistan. So I don't think it's a practical course of action to replace NATO with OSCE, for a whole variety of reasons. Your second question was?

From the floor

On the fresh start.

John McCain

Oh, I think that what seems to be a commitment on both sides to get back into serious negotiations concerning strategic weaponry is a very good thing. And apparently the Russians are agreeable to exploring and moving forward with those negotiations, which have been stalled for a long time, as you know. I wish them every success. I want to support, in every way, a betterment of relations between the United States and Russia. And any agreements, we know, lead to other agreements. I think it is a good thing to have started on strategic weapons negotiations.

From the floor

On missile defence, how do you feel? Do you support the pursuing of this project or do you think it's --

John McCain

I obviously support the defensive weaponry. The Russians still have a very large arsenal of weapons and the means to deliver them. This defensive weapons system which is being contemplated in Poland and the Czech Republic does not pose any kind of a threat to anyone, much less the Russians. So if the two governments agree -- I note with some interest, the Czech Republic has postponed their vote on this issue. I think they are trying to figure out exactly what the future of this proposal is. Some things you revisit over and over and over again. The missile defence is defence. And how someone would view that or some governments would view that as offensive -- I still don't buy that logic.

Julian Bolger - The Guardian

On this question of minimalism again, is there nothing that Richard Holbrook has said today about the plans for civilians, upgrading the police and so on, convinced you that that battle has been won within the Obama Administration?

John McCain

Listen, I just know for a fact that the debate has gone on. Washington is a town that, in some ways, is very small. And it's not just my view. It's widely reported that there has been this debate about a "minimalist approach" on both sides of the Atlantic. So I want to repeat again, that was basically, in many respects, the approach we were using in Iraq, which was failing.

And by the way, the situation in Iraq was far, far more severe than the one in Afghanistan today. We were losing more people in one day. There were higher civilian casualties in one day in Iraq than there was in one month in Afghanistan. So I know that debate has gone on. I've been part of it with some of my colleagues in the Senate. And we will continue that debate and discussion.

Let me put it this way. I have guarded optimism that President Obama will announce very shortly an approach which is robust and is a counterterrorism/counterinsurgency such as I outlined in my remarks. I am guardedly optimistic. But I also emphasise again, we have to tell our publics, both on this side of the Atlantic and the other side of the Atlantic that this is a very tough situation we're in. And as our forces move south in Afghanistan, there will be renewed conflict and casualties, just as there was when we began the surge in Iraq and moved into areas that were controlled by the Jihadists.

Thank you all very much.

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