

our national security interests in the next few years.

When I entered office, the main concern was to halt and reverse the spiraling violence in order to prevent a strategic calamity for the United States and allow the Iraqis to make progress on the political, economic, and security fronts. Although we all have criticisms of the Iraqi government, there can be no doubt that the situation is much different – and far better – than it was in early 2007. The situation, however, remains fragile.

Disagreements in our country still exist over the speed of the drawdowns and whether we should adhere to hard-and-fast timelines or more flexible time horizons.

I worry that the great progress our troops and the Iraqis have made has the potential to over-ride a measure of caution born of uncertainty. Our military commanders do not yet believe our gains are necessarily enduring – and they believe that there are still many challenges and the potential for reversals in the future. The continuing but carefully modulated reductions the President has ordered represent, I believe, not only the right direction but also the right course of action – especially considering planned and unplanned redeployments by some of our coalition partners. The planned reductions are an acceptable risk today, but also provide for unforeseen circumstances in the future. The reductions also preserve a broad range of options for the next commander in chief, who will make his own assessment after taking office in January.

As we proceed deeper into the endgame, I would urge our nation's leaders to implement strategies that, while steadily reducing our presence in Iraq, are cautious and flexible and take into account the advice of our senior commanders and military leaders. I would also urge our leaders to keep in mind that we should expect to be involved in Iraq for many years to come, although in changing and increasingly limited ways.

Let me shift to Afghanistan. There we are working with the Afghans and coalition partners to counter a classic extremist insurgency fueled by ideology, poppy, poverty, crime, and corruption.

During my recent visit to Afghanistan, I reaffirmed our commitment to success in that country – a commitment that includes increasing the size of our forces in country as well as the size and capabilities of the Afghan security forces. I also expressed my regret, and the regret of the American people, for the civilians killed and injured in coalition and NATO airstrikes. While no other nation in history has done more to protect the innocent, I pledged that we must, and will do better.

First, some positive developments:

- The international coalition, led by NATO, is more committed than it has ever been. We see this in increased troop contributions from our partners, as well as efforts to reduce some of the caveats they place on their troops. There are also increased resources being devoted to non-military efforts. Our allies deserve credit, and I thank them for their sacrifices.
- At the Paris Donors Conference in June, the international community pledged more than \$20 billion in assistance to Afghanistan.
- The United Nations appointed Ambassador Kai Eide of Norway as the Special Representative of the Secretary General to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. Ambassador Eide has been empowered to play a greater role in coordinating international assistance to ensure aid is distributed effectively and where it is most needed.
- The Afghan National Army is more than 65,000 strong and growing. Earlier this month, the President announced an initiative to double the size of the Afghan National Army over the next