

Remarks of Caroline Ziemke for the Open Session on the Future of Iraq and Afghanistan:

Good afternoon. Our focus in this session is on the likely direction of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the broader war on terror during the new administration. I have been asked to say a few words concerning the implications of last week's election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States.

The short answer to the question from the US perspective is that it is much too soon to know. The key civilian personnel – the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and National Security Advisor – have not been named. Moreover, the recent and severe economic crisis is likely to dominate the early attention of the Obama transition team.

There are, however, a few things we do know.

First, the key operational leadership will remain in place for the foreseeable future. General David H. Petraeus has only recently taken over command of CENTCOM and will command US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

General Ray Odierno, who was a close associate of Petraeus in Iraq will take over operational command of US forces there and is unlikely to depart significantly from the strategic approach Petraeus has put in place since the surge began in late 2006. General David McKiernan will remain the top US commander in Afghanistan.

Second, Obama has made several clear statements concerning his goals for Iraq and Afghanistan.

- He pledged to implement a phased redeployment of US troops from Iraq to Afghanistan that would be underway within 18 months of his taking office.
- The focus on the redeployment would be on moving US combat forces to Afghanistan and shifting responsibility for Iraq's security and stability to the Iraqi army and police.
- Political pressure will increase on the Iraqi civilian leadership to "step up" and take responsibility for the stability and recovery of their country.
- A residual US combat force (of a size yet to be defined) would remain indefinitely in Iraq to perform limited missions, primarily protecting US training forces, civilian presence, and assisting Iraqi security forces when necessary.

Obama clearly stated his determination to shift strategic focus toward Afghanistan with the goal of eliminating Al-Qaida and Taliban safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan's border regions and create an environment in which the Afghan government can establish control and stability.

We also know that while Obama will enjoy a unprecedented international "honeymoon," this period of goodwill could be brief. It is important that we all, Americans and the international community alike, keep our expectations realistic and understand that any change in US strategy will take time, especially in the current environment of economic crisis. A new direction is likely, but it will be gradual.