



## Interview with General John R. Allen, USMC (ret.)

### **We retaliated against the Taliban for harboring al-Qaeda, ousting them from power in Afghanistan in 2001. Why are we still there?**

The mission was not just about al-Qaeda. We had two objectives; to destroy al-Qaeda, and to prevent the resurgence of the Taliban, which would have created the cycle all over again. The day I took command in Afghanistan (on July 18, 2011) I initiated an immediate campaign review which started with my review of the political objectives, which were the elimination and control of the potential for the resurgence of al-Qaeda, and to prevent the Taliban from overthrowing the Afghanistan government.

The second of the two missions was the principal role that I played there for the almost 19 months I was in command and defines the U.S. presence thereafter, which is to provide the capability for the Afghanistan government to stand on its own. One of the things that is lost often in this question, which is an important question, is that there is this sense we are still fighting in Afghanistan. The combat mission ended on December 31, 2014, and since that time the purpose of NATO forces, with the United States of course as part of it, has been to train and advise the Afghans, and that is what we have been doing ever since; over time giving the Afghans the capacity to provide for their own security.

It has been very difficult, and one of the difficulties is that we made bad decisions as we were moving towards the end of the campaign. I commanded 150,000 troops, and the day I took command I gave up 10,000. The President's guidance to me, during my command, was to pivot the war. In other words, the intent was to begin the process of ramping down. This would include returning the 33,000 surge troops, 10,000 of which I signed off on the day I took command, and beginning to close down the theater. When I took command, I had 835 bases, 500 of which I closed within a year, heading ultimately toward fewer than 20 bases by December, 2014;

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I was to move the Afghans into the lead for combat operations, and re-posture our forces from being the principal combat forces in Afghanistan to being an advisory force for the Afghans. All of that had to be done within a very short period. From my perspective, the decisionmaking on the drawdown was flawed. We came down too fast, and the residual force after December 31, 2014 was too small and on too short a timeline to realistically support the continued development of the Afghan security forces needed to give the Afghans the ability to stand on their feet over the long term.

**Was that one of the major decision points during your time in Afghanistan?**

Yes, and it was a mistake. My recommendation to the President was 13,600 troops, with another 6,000 or so non-U.S., NATO, and allied forces. So, 20,000 troops, distributed across the country. The concept was to have a have a “pervasive touch,” meaning we needed to be in direct training and advising contact with as much of the Afghan security force as we could to improve its capabilities and professionalism and to keep it constantly trained. Over time we would lift up off the ground forces, gradually ascending to higher echelons of the Afghan commands, and finally concentrating our training and advisory presence at the Corps level across Afghanistan including the six regional Corps and one capital Corps. But the final, post-2014 number was too small, and the glide slope to come out was far too sharp. We should have been there at least 10 years. I fully support President Trump’s decision to accept Secretary Mattis’ recommendation to remove the end date for the U.S. commitment.

**We have been there 17 years; looking back over the whole 17-year effort, what are the capstone lessons we should have learned by now?**

Continuity of operations is one of them, continuity of command. When I took command in July of

2011, I was the fourth 4-star that President Karzai had to deal with in four years. You cannot fight these kinds of wars one year at a time. You have got to have continuity of command. Our current commander has been there going on two and a half years. We should have had our commanders go there for two, three, four years at a time so we had a continuity in the headquarters. You could rotate people out, but we needed to have that continuity. That was the first thing. Second thing was, we needed to stay there long enough in force to give the Afghans the time they needed to get ready to go. I think the analysis would stand up even to this day that the 33,000 surge forces, which I was required to bring home by September 30, 2012 should have remained for at least another year. We, Generals Petraeus, Allen, and others believed the surge forces should have been there until well into 2013, and not come home in 2012. Their early return did two things—it cut back on our combat capabilities, and hastened the movement of Afghans into the fight before they were ready. And that of course created some problems. They were not ready and we got too small too fast.

I think the current President made the right decision, which is to stay there until we are able to accomplish the objectives that we have on giving the Afghan security forces the capacity to provide security for the government. But this is a triangular issue. It is not a single issue for our strategy. Our grand strategy should be not just to provide for security, but to provide for enhanced governmental capacity and also to provide the kinds of economic stimulus necessary to tie it all together. All three of those things need to exist together, and we do not have a coherent policy in that regard.

**Can you speak for a minute about the governance side of the equation? The military and security side is one thing, but the challenge of developing**

**Afghan governance seems to be out of our reach. How do we accomplish that goal?**

It is a joint operation that requires that the Europeans be involved—as they have been—but I think we have to be realistic about our expectations for how Afghanistan has traditionally been and will be governed in the future. No Afghan government in modern history has governed every square inch of Afghanistan. Sometimes it is called the “Swiss cheese” approach. I do not want to be trite or diminish the importance of the problem, but from the days of Alexander the Great, Kabul was the center of governance, and then you had what they call the “Four Corners” approach; Mazar-e-Sharif in the North, which is primarily Uzbek and Tajik with some Turkmen; Herat in the West, which has a heavy and ancient Persian influence; and Kandahar in the South and Jalalabad in the East, the populations of both being principally Pashtun. Typically, Kabul governed through those four power centers, and power resided there with governors or strongmen who governed at the local level. The challenge we always had when I was commander there was while our great young troops were able to relatively effectively organize grassroots-level governance in the villages and had pretty good governmental development in Kabul, it was connecting the central government to the provincial level that was the challenge and an elusive element to us. If we do not invest in that, then it is going to continue to be elusive.

**At this point, how long do you think it will take, if we were to stay all in as we are, to prepare the Afghans to take on the security challenge?**

I do not think we have built the benchmarks yet. I am not in the day-to-day strategy development process, but we have been in Kosovo now for more than 20 years. We have been in the Sinai for well-over 30. I do not know what the final length of the commitment, or the numbers of troops will be, but I do know that a commitment of two and a half years

and 9,000 troops going down to 500 troops, was not going to do it, frankly, and so I applaud President Trump’s decision to remove the end date of the deployment. I do not know how long we will stay or if we can even put a date on it yet, but how long have we been in Korea? I do not propose we stay big and long, but it is worth remembering that at the end of the Korean War, Korea was flat on its back. It had no discernable government, its economy was in shambles, and its military capacity was very limited. Today, Korea has a functioning and admirable democracy, with one of the most vibrant economies on the planet. None of that could have happened if the United States had not stayed. We do not have to stay and fight forever, but our political, economic, and security presence ought to be coordinated with our allies and the Afghans, and have some discernable objectives for how we can begin to wind down that presence, or stay for some longer period of time. But to go from 150,000 troops to 7,000 to 500 in five years after fighting an insurgency across an entire country was a decision that was not going to work.

**When you left ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], you were given the assignment as the U.S. President’s Special Representative to the International Counter-ISIL Coalition. Do you think it is safe now to say that ISIL has been defeated?**

No. I have said from the very moment I took the job that until we defeat the idea of ISIL it is not defeated. As you know ISIL exploded in our face in 2014 although it had been in Iraq and in Syria for a while. The corrupt governance in Iraq under the Shia, Maliki regime, along with the activities of Shia militias against the Sunni minorities both in and around Baghdad and also in the west up the Euphrates in al-Anbar, were so horrible that in many respects, as ISIL began to materialize as a Sunni jihadist organization, they were embraced by the Sunni tribes as a rescue force from the corruption and abuse of the Maliki regime.

The emergence of ISIL was neither spontaneous nor was it superficial. It emerged as a direct lineal descendent of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which we largely neutralized in 2006 when we killed al-Zarqawi. The group went into Syria, where it found safe haven in the context of the civil war and grew alongside Jabhat al-Nusrah—which was the al-Qaeda-based Syrian resistance element to President Bashar al-Assad since 2012—but became so abusive, so violent, and so repugnant that even al-Qaeda kicked them out of the organization, and they would ultimately move into Iraq again. By 2015, we defined it as a “monster with three heads.” One is what we call Core-ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Then you had Provincial ISIL, which were pre-existing jihadist organizations that raised the black flag of ISIL in locations around the world and were accepted into the broader global caliphate of the Islamic State. Then we talk about Network ISIL.

The Global Coalition deserves a lot of credit. It helped the Iraqis and those willing elements in Syria to largely defeat Core ISIL and the identifiable ISIL center of gravity. But it has not killed them all. There are pockets of ISIL still existing, and there was just a terrorist attack in Erbil believed to be ISIL. And then we have many of the provinces or wilayats. Ansar al-Sharia in Northern Africa, Boko Haram, and others; these are all now provinces of ISIL and we have to deal with them over time. The Global Coalition is not going to fight them. This will have to be local coalitions led by the United States, but today I do not think anyone knows whether or not the United States is leading on these issues.

The one that worries me the most is Network ISIL. It is riding on the internet and using encrypted cellphone capabilities for global strategic communications, for the movement of forces regionally, and as necessary to facilitate tactical encrypted communications in the attack. I was in Paris in January 2015 when the first ISIL attack occurred there. We did not even know it was coming until the first rounds were

fired because all communications had been done over WhatsApp and other systems like this.

**In your view, what was the added value of the Coalition? How did it justify itself in terms of the value added as opposed to a unilateral American operation?**

The United States should never have picked this challenge up alone, in any case, as a unilateral effort. From the beginning, this needed to be an international approach to defeating the organization. The UN could not have picked it up, because China and Russia were not going to participate, so the UN could never have issued a UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR). It needed to be an ad hoc coalition. President Obama called for it; [then Secretary of State] John Kerry to his great credit held a series of rolling conferences around the world, chaired in Paris, France, and Riyadh, [Saudi Arabia] etc. where a growing number of nations attended; so when the President called on the international community to defeat this scourge, countries signed up. The President asked me to run the Coalition for him. The first meeting we had was on December 3, 2014 in Brussels, where 58 countries appeared of the 65 that had signed up by then. As a Global Coalition, they contributed forces, money, and stabilization efforts aimed at rescuing populations to be liberated. We simply could not have done it without the Global Coalition.

**After 17 years of prioritizing the Global War on Terror, the new National Security Strategy elevates great power competition above international terrorism. What is your opinion on that?**

I think it is important. Remember that terrorism is never more than a tactic. If you engage in a grand strategic war on tactics then you are missing the point. However from my perspective, while the U.S. has to be prepared for peer competition, which we will increasingly find across the board from China and to a significant but much less dangerous

extent from Russia, as well as from other nations that will challenge us as they grow regionally. That said, there remain truly substantial, and unresolved human causal factors that will continue to radicalize millions of men and women in the developing world, which of course continues to feed the violent extremist ranks and networks. We have not really embraced the solutions to many of the reasons why young men and women are radicalized in the world and then enfolded into the arms of extremists and become terrorists. Many of the motivations evident in the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 are shared by millions of young men and women around the world. Rather than fighting these organizations when they become dangerous terrorists, we would reap a lot more benefit by swimming upstream from the point of terrorist attack, and trying to solve the human factors that have radicalized so many.

When we talk about strategies for countering violent extremism, from my perspective that strategy begins too late in the process. We should have strategies for countering radicalization and taking those steps that are not necessarily, or even mostly security related, yet that help the economic circumstances of the preponderance of the populations in these countries.

About 60 percent of the population in the Middle East is below the age of 25, which constitutes a youth bulge of frustrated young people whose aspirations can never be fulfilled by their own governments. Demographers and governments in the region have been concerned for a very long time about what will be the outcome when this ticking time bomb goes off. If we as a community of nations have not worked to solve the base causal factors, we are going to get another tsunami just as we did in 2011. The result of our inability to solve these problems has resulted in massive unrest in the region resulting in toppled governments and civil wars of which the tragedy of the Syrian Civil War is only one example. How many refugees has that generated?

How much change has Europe had to undergo because of the influx of millions of refugees that have come out of an unstable Middle East and North Africa. What this ultimately means is that until we get serious as a community of nations and address the factors that cause radicalization and political unrest, we are going to be fighting forever.

Now, should we be preparing ourselves for great power competition? The answer is absolutely yes. China will be the most consequential relationship for the United States for the 21st century and we should view it as opportunity. The indispensable relationship for the United States though will be India, and we need to put a lot more emphasis on developing that relationship. It is the largest democracy on the planet, has a relatively vibrant economy, and there is a lot that we share in terms of common values, so we ought to be cultivating that relationship as much as we can.

**One of the key phrases in the National Security Strategy is “America First.” What is your understanding of America First, and what are the ramifications of that?**

America has always been strongest when in partnership with our allies and partners. It has always been strongest in that regard, and it did not take very long after 9/11 for us to realize the limits of American power when we go it alone. So when America First is our mantra, and we then back it up with protectionist trade policies and poorly considered trade wars, and tough, often-times isolationist and xenophobic rhetoric, there is a strong likelihood it will instead become “America Only” from our having isolated ourselves or, simply, “America Alone.” And China, with an alternative model to the new American way, is only flowing rapidly into the resulting vacuum. China is largest in foreign direct investment in many countries around the world today, and has proliferated the concept of “debt trap diplomacy,” where a country becomes so

indebted to another that its economic and political decisionmaking is enormously constrained and even captured by the relationship with the lender. We are well-down that road, and the United States with its America First-based policies has not supplied a counter to that type of foreign intervention.

**What kinds of reforms does NATO need to remain relevant and a reliable partner for the United States?**

From my perspective, the greatest weakness of NATO is not the Russian threat, which is a threat we can deal with, nor the instability to the south which has generated hundreds of thousands of refugees and weakened the cohesion of Europe. These are the visible threats, but for me the greatest threat to NATO is its inability to clearly articulate what its requirements are, accompanied by a logical spending plan that supports those requirements. NATO must spend what is necessary to have the kinds of forces it needs with interoperability across the Alliance.

That being said, NATO has always been a reliable partner for the United States and I absolutely disagree with anyone who says NATO is obsolete. With the rise of Russia and all that it has done to Ukraine, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Syria, plus the rise of China and the potential for debt trap diplomacy, and the continued Salafi jihadist movements around the world, one of the most important aspects of NATO is that it is a coalition of 29 nations with similar values and beliefs on human rights and the rule of law. We have a couple of members that are straying from the pack and we are going to have to deal with that at some point, but NATO remains the largest grouping of states on the planet with shared values, values that we as Americans hold as self-evident. That is why NATO is important, and is why when President Obama called for a global coalition to fight ISIL, all 29 members of NATO signed up immediately, along with virtually all members of the EU. Others came later, but NATO

came immediately. That is why this is a relevant process, and why we will sort out the articulation of the requirements. The headquarters is absolutely full of people smart enough to do that.

**What do you consider to be the biggest holes in our national security architecture as we look forward to the challenges ahead?**

From my perspective, science and emerging technologies are galloping away from the capacity of government to understand, embrace, and to support, and even regulate these breathtaking developments. We have the digital and tech giants with all of their capabilities with respect to influence within large segments of the population overwriting, if you will, the concept of sovereignty as we have defined it since the Peace of Westphalia, at the end of the Thirty Years' War, and which would define for the next several centuries the modern concept of sovereignty. That concept is undermined by the internet. And following the advent of the internet, and using the internet as a backbone, the emergence of social media has extended the influence of these non-governmental platforms, and we are now seeing, what I view as the alarming growth of digital governance. For example, and even though it has taken a beating of late, Facebook influences as many as 2.4 billion people every single day. There is no country on the planet with that kind of reach. Facebook shows you what you can buy, influences what you should think, and the Russians used that platform and advertisements on Facebook to directly impact the U.S. elections in 2016. So the whole idea of operating in the cyber environment and the implications for our national sovereignty and national defense are sobering, made all the more so when one considers the emergence of AI, high-speed computing, with the idea that one day quantum computing will create orders of magnitude greater capability both in terms of the capacity of AI to be influential and the capacity to extend influence. This seems to me to

be a huge gap . . . a vulnerability . . . for our national security, the enormity of which we are only beginning to understand.

At the same time that we are making paltry national investments in this, the Chinese are putting 150 billion dollars into research in AI and emerging technology just at the governmental level. That does not include other corporate efforts within China; Chinese President Xi Jinping has set China on the road to surpass U.S. tech capabilities by 2030. We have to recognize that much of the technology that they are developing will not only benefit Chinese citizens, it will also find its way into the military realm. We have to be ready for that—war that is fought by autonomous systems, and perhaps even autonomous weapons at speeds hitherto unknown in the annals of warfare. Called “hyperwar” this will be warfare at the computer level with highly sophisticated AI algorithms where humans are seldom found in the loop. The role of the human in the loop is and should be the subject of an enormous ethical debate. And while the speed of conflict used to be governed primarily by physical laws, soon it will be governed by the speed of light as autonomous systems, operating in both the cyber and physical realms contest the new battlespace for dominance. The implications of hyperwar, if we are not ready, could be dire. **PRISM**