

Dunford Encouraged by Afghan Security Forces in Latest Afghanistan Strategy

ARLINGTON, Va. – The nation's top military officer argued that the U.S. military role in Afghanistan was necessary to protect the U.S. homeland from violent extremists and that the strategy was working in the sense that Afghan security forces were carrying the fight, not Americans.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford said if he thought it was in America's interest to withdraw U.S. forces, he would have recommended that, but did not because he believed it was essential to homeland security.

As far as justifying the continued presence to U.S. forces making multiple deployments after 17 years of conflict in Afghanistan, Dunford said, "I'm not promising anything other than this is not what we did 2015," before the new strategy was adopted. The 15,000 U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan are not leading the fight. "We are providing support to Afghan security forces," he said.

Addressing an Oct. 26 conference held by military reporters and editors at the Navy League headquarters, Dunford said the drive to end the war in Afghanistan had three tracks – military and political pressure on the Taliban to convince them they could not win and religious and social pressure from Afghans.

"We need to continue doing what we've been doing to support the Afghan security forces. ... But it would be a mistake to focus on the military aspect," he said.

On another current issue, Dunford said no mobilization orders have been given to send active-duty forces to the Mexican

border in anticipation of the convoy of Central American asylum seekers moving north through Mexico and he only knew of the plan for 800 such troops from the news media.

Asked whether he was concerned about the continued cancelation of U.S. exercises with South Korean forces, Dunford hedged a bit, saying they had to balance the security risks of not holding the regular joint exercises against supporting the diplomatic efforts to denuclearize North Korea. The military's focus was on supporting Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's negotiations, he said.

On broader issues, Dunford said the Defense Department could not assume it would continue to receive higher funding, as it did the last two years, and had to focus the expected limited resources on developing the forces it would need to confront the return of great power competition and to modernize the force to reverse the erosion in the U.S. strategic advantage against Russia and China.

He said decisions on how to prioritize spending would be shaped by a planned series of exercises and wargames.

Dunford said the recent increases in defense funding have enabled the military to fix the readiness problems "that can be fixed by money" but noted the need to substantially increase the size of its cybersecurity components. To get the skilled people needed, he said the services would have to change some personnel policies, such as allowing easier moves between active and reserve components and allowing people who wanted to specialize in cyber to remain in those jobs without the usual rotations into other jobs now considered necessary for career development.