House Panel's Dissatisfaction With President on Afghanistan, Syria, Africa Cuts Across Party Lines

Members of the House Armed Services Committee expressed bipartisan concern and opposition to President Donald Trump's policies and statements on Afghanistan, Syria and Africa, with Republicans and Democrats throwing critical questions and opinions at the commanders of those crucial areas on March 7.

The criticism started at the top, with committee Chairman Adam Smith (D-Wash.) saying the "decisions by the administration appear to be uninformed, without the consultation of senior leaders in the [Defense Department] and – importantly – without consulting our allies and partners," which "are clearly impacting our alliances and partnerships."

U.S. Rep. Mac Thornberry of Texas, the top Republican, said he "shared" Smith's concerns about "where we are going from now" in the fight against the ISIS extremists in Syria and Iraq. "We need to keep pressure on the terrorist networks," despite the liberation of most of the ISIS territory, Thornberry said.

That line of questions and statements continued down to the most junior members of the panel, many of whom are veterans of those conflicts.

Army Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, and Marine Corps Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, commander of Africa Command, tried to strike a positive tone in assessing conditions in their areas of responsibility, but conceded under the persistent questioning that some of the president's decisions and statements could have negative effects.

Votel, who is set to relinquish his command later this month, was particularly concerned about the president's repeated declarations that ISIS has been defeated in Syria and Iraq, which justified major reductions in U.S. forces there.

While noting that the U.S.-led coalition had reduced ISIS' self-proclaimed caliphate from 243,000 square miles to less than one mile, "the fight against violent extremists is far from over," Votel said.

What we are seeing now is not a surrender of ISIS" in the shrinking pocket of land in Syria, but "a calculated decision" to protect its fighters "while waiting for a chance to re-emerge," he said.

Votel, who has said he was not consulted before Trump declared ISIS beaten and ordered all U.S. forces withdrawn from Syria, said he is proceeding with a phased withdrawal of his forces with a primary focus of protecting the small number who now are expected to remain.

Asked how the Russians reacted to Trump's decision to leave Syria, Votel said it was "positive" as the Russians believed they would be "filling the vacuum" and perpetuating their relations with Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Votel said he was "confident" that the small U.S. force, now expected to be about 400, that Trump later decided to retain in Syria could keep ISIS from regaining ground. But, he added, it would be "not just U.S. forces, but our partners."

Asked if he agreed with the president's decision to remove most U.S. forces from Syria and at least half of its troops from Afghanistan, Votel said, "most of us would say these decisions have to be based on conditions at that time."

As for Afghanistan, he said his advice would be that any decision on forces "should be done in full consultation with our partners." He added: "We have not received any orders to

withdraw” forces from Afghanistan.

Pressed repeatedly about the negotiations with the Taliban, conducted by Zalmy Kahlilzad with no involvement by the Afghan government, Votel said those talks are in the early stages and any agreement would have to be made by Kabul. U.S. goals in the negotiations are to protect U.S. interests and ensure the security of the Afghan government.

Waldhauser was more sanguine about the troop reductions ordered in his command, noting that his initial instructions were to withdraw about 10 percent of his counter-terrorism forces, which are primarily special operations personnel, while keeping the 6,000 conventional troops advising and assisting local forces. Those troops would be distributed based on the status of efforts to improve the capabilities of local forces, he said.

Asked if he considered that enough of a force, he said, “adequate.”