

Good afternoon, and welcome to you all. We are together this afternoon to hear an extraordinary group of witnesses testify on a subject of increasingly urgent importance; the possible consequences of American military action against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Today's hearing is the third in a series that the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs has undertaken to examine United States' foreign policy towards Iran.

At our first hearing, we heard experts describe the current conditions, make-up and complexity of Iranian society, including the largely positive public opinion there toward the United States.

At our second hearing, we heard insider accounts from former senior diplomats and intelligence officials about the many missed and wasted negotiating opportunities with the Iranians over the past few years.

Today, we are extremely fortunate to have before us a group of top military, diplomatic and intelligence experts, who will provide the Subcommittee with what the public and the Congress have needed for quite some time — an unvarnished discussion of what could happen should this Administration, before exhausting diplomatic alternatives, act to commit American forces in war against Iran.

And, make no mistake about it, some like to refer to “airstrikes” or “limited military action” or other sanitized and neatly controlled terms, but those choices in vocabulary will be meaningless to the people on the receiving end of our force. The Iranian government and the Iranian people will see any such action as war and will respond accordingly.

Although some members of this Administration and their supporters have loudly proposed attacking Iran, none of them to my knowledge have explained what potential consequences we, as a nation, would be left having to manage, not only over the next year, but over decades and generations to come.

History shows us, unfortunately, that it is far easier to rattle a saber than it is to clean-up the consequences of war.

One need only look at a map to understand Iran's centrality for a whole host of U.S. national security interests.

We are in the middle of an expensive and bloody war in Iraq and an equally difficult and dangerous campaign to build the entire government and infrastructure of Afghanistan. One shares Iran's western border, the other its eastern.

We have hundreds of thousands of soldiers who have fought and continue to fight in these two countries. We have invested hundreds of billions of dollars and diverted critical military resources.

We heard at our second hearing the positive efforts Iran played in helping to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan. We've also heard repeatedly about Iran's involvement with Shi'a militia groups in Iran.

If the U.S. attacks Iran, how will Iran and its allies retaliate, and what impact will this have on the safety of our troops and the future stability of both Iraq and Afghanistan?

Instead of using hard-nosed diplomacy and efforts to improve relations with Iran or, at the very least, putting in place control mechanisms to avoid having small confrontations or accidents spiral into major hostilities, this Administration issues threats and condemnations.

If you look at the map of Iran carefully, you'll see that Pakistan and Turkey also border Iran – two countries that are absolutely vital to regional and global security. And many of our closest allies in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, lie directly across the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.

But as we'll hear from our witnesses today, the potential consequences of military action in Iran don't just stop with those countries directly surrounding Iran.

For example, how will an attack on yet another Muslim country further erode the United States' broader and long-term effort to win over hearts and minds in our global anti-terror efforts?

How will the Arab-Israeli peace process be affected?

How will China and Russia react; will they, for example, take advantage of these American actions to swoop in and scoop up further trade and diplomatic opportunities?

How will the U.S. and global economy react to actual or threatened disruptions in oil supplies, especially at a time when global supplies are stretched to their maximum and the U.S. economy shows signs of a troubling softening?

Everyone agrees the dilemma posed for us in dealing with Iran is extremely difficult and complex. There are serious and inherent dangers, for example, of an Iran with nuclear weaponry. Among other concerns, a nuclear Iran could serve as a catalyst to a proliferation surge in the region and pose a more threatening presence in the region more generally.

Iran has also supported groups aligned with terrorist sympathies, and we certainly need to continue to carefully explore the role that Iran is playing in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

We need to take all of these developments extremely seriously. Still, as our two previous Iran-focused hearings and numerous other forums have shown, there are significant alternatives to war that have not yet been exhausted or adequately and skillfully pursued.

These alternatives should be considered as opposed to using military action as a first option or until we are directly threatened or in imminent danger.

But I worry that, unfortunately, the same rosy scenarios and foolhardy thinking that led us into Iraq in 2003 are gaining momentum once again with respect to Iran.

I ask the simple question, "Have we learned any lessons?" If nothing else, I hope we have learned the importance of having our eyes wide-open as we contemplate the possible paths forward, especially when one of those paths has such pervasive consequences as war.

That is what our hearing today is all about. The witnesses here today were asked to testify because of your breadth and depth of experiences.

At least four of you have served in uniform, and you collectively bring a wealth of personal and professional experiences. You also, I know, bring a patriotism borne of personal sacrifice and a deep love of our country and its rich heritage and strength of ideals.

I have no doubt that the Members of this Subcommittee and the American people will benefit from the opportunity to learn from your decades of collective military, diplomatic and intelligence experience and to do so before the drums of war drown out the ability to have a reasoned and thoughtful discussion.

I thank these witnesses for being with us today, and I look forward to your testimony. I now yield to the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Congressman Chris Shays.