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Army Gen. David Petraeus warned Congress Friday that the United States faces a "tough road" ahead in Afghanistan and more difficult challenges than in Iraq, where he led American forces before taking charge of the U.S. Central Command.

Appearing before the House Appropriations Committee, Petraeus said the mission set out by President Barack Obama is "vital" but will require a "sustained, substantial commitment," complicated further by Pakistan's failure thus far to do more to address the expanded Taliban insurgency in its own borders.

Afghanistan does not have "a number of the blessings" enjoyed by Iraq, whether measured in oil wealth or human capital and government infrastructure built up over the years, Petraeus told lawmakers. Iraq "had a large number of advantages and extraordinary national blessings in comparison to Afghanistan, obviously land locked, rugged, rural, 70 percent to 80 percent illiteracy rate."

“You have the challenging situation of policemen who can’t read or comprehend the laws that they are enforcing,” the general said. “These kind of difficulties make Afghanistan very, very hard. We have seen that and we continue to see that. This is why upfront I said this is going to take a sustained, substantial commitment.”

Petraeus credited the Pakistani army with making substantial sacrifices already in fighting Taliban or related insurgents in the border areas with Afghanistan. “They deserve our support. They not only need it, they have earned our support,” he said but what has been missing still is “the kind of whole-of-government approach that would result from a complete commitment by the Pakistani senior leaders ... the kind of commitment that will be necessary to face up what is again an existential threat to Pakistan.”

Petraeus’ appearance capped a week of increased activity — but also anxiety — in Congress as the administration has pressed for quick action on its \$83.4 billion request to sustain military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and forge a closer partnership with Pakistan to battle the Taliban threat.

The general gave closed door testimony Wednesday before the defense Appropriations subcommittee in the House but Friday was his most direct public comments on the request, which includes \$400 million to help train and equip Pakistan forces in counter-insurgency operations.

Many senior lawmakers are skittish about the broad authority Petraeus wants, which critics argue pre-empts the historic role of the State Department and aid programs. But he argued Friday that “we need a source of funds that has this responsiveness, has the flexibility that can enable us to focus the effort” on developing army units “that will conduct counter-insurgency operations as their primary objective.”

But the toughness of the challenge — and threat of a prolonged U.S. involvement so soon after Iraq — worries many Democrats. And even Republicans like Texas Rep, John Carter raised warning flags that the increased U.S. troop commitment can’t be seen as an invasion by the Afghan people.

“I think right now we’re perceived as a helper, but I think that’s a fine line that has to be walked,” Carter told Petraeus.

Loyal to Obama, few Democrats want to undercut the new president at this stage but the cost is a concern amid record deficits at home and still unfulfilled domestic agenda.

In a blunt exchange Thursday House Appropriations Committee Chairman Dave Obey warned Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that he is “very concerned that it is going to wind up with us stuck in a problem at nobody knows how to get

out of.”

“The problem is that you don’t want to pull the plug on a new administration but you don’t want to take action that cements a relationship for years to come,” Obey elaborated later in an interview with POLITICO.

“This is a Richard Russell moment with LBJ,” he said, evoking memories of the two old Senate friends being drawn into an ever larger U.S. commitment in Vietnam in the 1960s. “I don’t want this to be in for a dime in for a dollar. ... This will be a huge, huge, uphill climb.”

Mindful of the stakes, the administration has been careful in its approach — mixing realism with a determination to press ahead.

Clinton was sober in her assessment of the challenges ahead and Petraeus’ candor has won him praise from those who have skeptical of him in the past.

Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), who chairs the defense appropriations panel, had sometimes chafed at what he saw as the general’s “rosy” portrait of Iraq under the Bush administration. But without commenting on any details of the classified briefing, he said he was pleased with the general’s directness Wednesday.

“He understands, as we do, how difficult it will be in Afghanistan,” Murtha told POLITICO. “It was very realistic testimony. I was impressed by it.”

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