

Opening Statement of the Honorable Frank LoBiondo

House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

June 7, 2023

Chairman Turner, Ranking Member Himes, members of the committee... it is a true honor to be here before you today to share my insights from serving on the House Permanent Select Committee for Intelligence for the final eight of my twenty-four years tenure in the U.S. Congress. My time on the committee was some of the most personally rewarding and professionally challenging opportunities of my career in public service. It was a privilege to be appointed to HPSCI in 2011 and it is a privilege to testify before you today.

As you know, there are many aspects of serving on HPSCI we cannot discuss beyond the walls of the SCIF. Most Americans will never know the true extent of threats to our national security and the role those who serve on HPSCI and SSCI play in conjunction with the men and women of our Intelligence Community in thwarting those planned attacks. That is what makes your jobs today essential to our security going forward.

There is no shortage of issues before the committee for you to be rightly focused on. From Russian aggression in Europe to North Korea's provocation in Asia. From Iran's nuclear ambitions to the erosion of democratic institutions across the globe. The geopolitical picture is increasingly complex while the security situation is exponentially more fragile.

But I want to focus my remarks on a region often overlooked by U.S. policymakers to the detriment of our own national interests and security: Africa.

The dual threat of China's systematic expansion alongside the resurgence of terrorist recruitment and training makes ignoring Africa a grave strategic mistake for the United States. The unfinished business for our Intelligence Community is crucial to understanding China's advances and the operational capabilities terrorist groups are developing in various locations on the continent.

During my time on this committee, I made nearly two dozen trips to the African continent. My primary focus was the frontlines of engagement in the most hostile regions by our intelligence case officers and U.S. Special Forces. Somalia. Angola. Mali. Niger. Not the destinations of American tourists or state visits. Oftentimes I was the first sitting Member of Congress to visit in decades.

In the five years since my last trip, the situation has grown only more desperate from my vantage point. And the biggest geopolitical challenge to the United States is taking advantage of that.

Let me be blunt: China is bribing its way across the African continent, creating economic partnerships with impoverished African nations for its own global security objectives. From securing leasing rights for rare earth minerals to accessing key transportation infrastructure along the Atlantic and Indian oceans, China has muscled its way into the void created by a lack of sustained U.S. policy and engagement by numerous administrations.

In my opinion, our diplomatic engagement has been marginalized for competing priorities while our intelligence collection capabilities have been wholly inadequate for the entirety of the 21st century. This is providing opportunities not only for China, but for direct security threats to U.S. interests and assets.

Weak central governments across sub-Saharan Africa are allowing terrorists groups like Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram to expand operational training grounds to export their death and destruction to western democracies, with their goal of attacking the United States. Off-shoots of Al Qaeda and ISIS are looking to the Congo, Burkino Faso, Libya, the Central African Republic, and other economically depressed nations to gain a foothold. Recruitment of young men to terrorism is made easier by the sense of disillusionment with their own governments fueled by abandonment by the United States in the region.

What keeps me up at night is the critical mistake the U.S. could make by further reducing our intelligence capabilities in Africa. We must ramp up, not cut back, the federal resources and manpower we have in CIA, NSA and other intelligence partners to get a better understanding of how badly we are falling behind. A robust human intelligence program on the continent would give us greater insight into how terrorist groups are developing their operational capabilities. A strategic engagement on both the intelligence and diplomatic fronts would give us a counterbalance to China's exploits. We must engage, not evacuate, the region to demonstrate the importance of Africa to U.S. interests and regional stability.

Furthermore, let me take this opportunity to say that the briefings in Washington are no substitute for the feedback I received when engaging station chiefs or analysts in the field. Beyond the SCIF and outside of Washington is where you – as members of the committee – will get the unvarnished assessments to help you better do your jobs in allocating budgets, implementing effective operational capabilities, and ensuring better intelligence products. I came to quickly realize that the more hostile the environment, the more honest the conversation with those men and women who volunteered for those posts. Thus, ongoing direct contact with CIA station chiefs in these very challenging countries is absolutely necessary to understanding the authorization needs of the Intelligence Community to ensure the U.S. does not fall further behind.

Let me conclude by saying that the job is not done. Far from it. And it is now you who are charged with the critical work of providing federal resources, political support and, yes, vigorous oversight of the Intelligence Community. You are also charged with being uniform in the application of those duties across the agencies while holding accountable those who abuse the authority you've entrusted in them. The national security mission of this committee must be more than just bipartisan, it must be non-partisan. Historically this was an implicit fact rather than an explicit objective. It was this way during my time on the committee – and for many former members on this panel today - but regrettably changed in the years following my retirement.

Now in 2023, after years of political agendas infiltrating the national security debate, there is a confidence returning to those of us who still work in this space because of the clear and concerted efforts by Chairman Turner, Ranking Member Himes and all of you to diligently focus on doing the nation's work rather than scoring political points. On behalf of those of us who are encouraged by what we've seen thus far – from your joint media appearances to the recent bipartisan CODEL to U.S. intelligence partners in the Middle East – the tone you have set gives me hope that HPSCI is once again focused solely on the national security mission of this great nation. Thank you for returning HPSCI to its foundational roots.

And, because of that, I sit here before you as a willing partner and resounding advocate for your efforts. I hope my testimony can be helpful in your critical work and I look forward to your questions.