

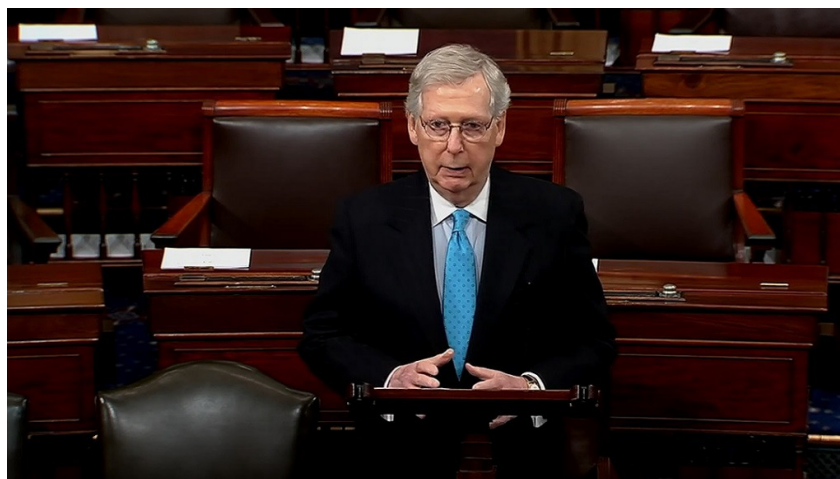


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Mitch McConnell

Floor Speech on Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act of 2019

delivered 30 January 2019, Washington, D.C.



[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

As I've discussed several times, the Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act is a consequential legislative package that would strengthen vital partnerships and reaffirm our active role in matters of global concern. I'm proud to support it. I was also proud to lay down an amendment yesterday that would allow the Senate to speak equally forcefully on crucial subjects in American foreign policy.

The United States is engaged in Syria and Afghanistan for one simple reason: because our enemies are engaged there. Real dangers to us and to our allies still remain in both these nations, so we must continue to confront them -- there.



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Fortunately, we're not alone. We're joined in the counter-ISIS coalition by 78 other partners. And in both Syria and Afghanistan, local fighters are bearing the brunt -- the brunt -- of the work. But American leadership is absolutely essential. And that's what this amendment is all about.

My amendment is not partisan. It expresses views and concerns from Senators on both sides of the aisle. And it certainly isn't political. I intended it as an opportunity for the Senate to debate and vote on some of the more consequential matters of the day, and I expected this institution to rise to the occasion. I was a Senator on September the 11th, 2001. I don't want America to ever live through another day like that. None of us do. I've also been here in the Senate for the 17 years since -- 17 years of American engagement in worldwide efforts to combat terrorism.

It hasn't been easy navigating American interests through this complicated and troubled region. It hasn't been easy adapting to an entirely new way of warfare against enemies that have proven adaptive themselves. It's understandable that as we get farther from November the -- from September 11th, many would grow tired of our military efforts a long way from home.

But -- as decisions from the Obama Administration have made painfully clear -- leaving too abruptly carries its own grave risk. Had President Obama known that ISIS would emerge in the wake of his withdrawal from Iraq and flourish in the chaos of the Syrian civil war, I suspect he might have done things differently. Perhaps he would not have abandoned Iraq so precipitously, ignored the growing terror threats in Syria, or allowed Assad to stream-roll over his now-infamous "red line." So we can't undo this unfortunate history, but we certainly cannot afford to repeat it.

So it has been a welcome contrast to see the Trump Administration make huge progress, reinvigorating our fight against al Qaeda in Afghanistan and ISIS in Syria.



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Unshackling our military has led to progress on the ground, greater pressure placed on the terrorists, and new opportunities for diplomatic and political solutions that have opened up as a result of the pressure that we applied. So what we must remember, Mr. President, is how hard-won these gains have been.

Our response to this progress must not be to take our foot off the gas pedal, but rather to keep up those strategies that are clearly working. Our partnership with Iraqi security forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces have stripped ISIS of much territory in those two nations.

But we've not yet defeated ISIS.

We have not yet defeated Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Civil wars continue to rage in both Iraq and Afghanistan. They are still cauldrons -- cauldrons -- of sectarianism, extremism, and terror.

President Trump is right that this cannot be America's fight alone. The threats that ISIS and al Qaeda pose are global. That's why many countries are with us in this fight. There is more those partners can and should do to keep up the direct pressure on terrorists, and on outside actors who interfere with diplomatic efforts to resolve these wars. Putin's Russia and the Ayatollahs in Tehran need to pay a real price for their attempts to back butchers -- butchers -- like the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and the Taliban.

We also need to understand that if we withdraw too soon -- too soon -- we will create vacuums in Syria and Afghanistan. We know from experience that Russia and Iran would be only too happy to fill those vacuums. If we truly care about containing Russia, the battleground is not only on Twitter or Facebook, but also in the world of old-fashioned geopolitics.

So my amendment would afford Senators the opportunity to speak on all these subjects. I honestly did not expect this would be controversial stuff.



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I didn't expect that my colleagues across the aisle would make a partisan stand and try to block this straightforward "sense of the Senate" amendment -- when it really just restates -- restates -- what most of us thought was a broad, bipartisan consensus about American leadership in the world.

But that's what our Democratic colleagues did. They tried to block it. Democrats objected to a vote on this amendment, apparently because it would expose a rift among their own membership. A division between those Senate Democrats who still subscribe to the vision for American leadership and their colleagues who have abandoned those principles at the urging of the very Far Left -- or are too afraid to take either position -- either one. It's quite the split, Mr. President. It shows how caught up my Democratic colleagues are in the partisanship of the moment.

My amendment simply re-emphasizes the expertise and counsel offered by experts who have served presidents of both parties. It's a mainstream amendment with 19 co-sponsors. But apparently a significant portion of today's Democratic Party isn't sure -- isn't sure -- they believe in these principles anymore. They'd rather try to squash the debate and dodge the vote altogether.

Well, that's not going to work. These are exactly the kind of issues the Senate should be debating. The Senate has a special role in foreign policy. Americans are serving in harm's way in Syria and Afghanistan. The American servicemembers, diplomats, and aid workers in those conflict zones all deserve to know whether their elected officials support their efforts or whether we no longer believe their tireless efforts serve our national interest. Our constituents deserve to know which Senators welcome a thorough debate over Syria and Afghanistan and which are simply trying to duck the debate.

Well, despite my Democratic colleagues' attempt, I can assure the American people they're going to learn precisely that.



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I filed cloture on the amendment yesterday afternoon and we'll vote on it. Regardless of whatever political contortions the Far Left may be demanding from Senate Democrats, the American people are going to learn exactly where their Senators stand. Our institution will not shrink from this important duty.