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Obama pushes ahead on Afghan war despite waning support

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With a growing-yet-ambiguous mission and no clear exit strategy, the war in Afghanistan is fast becoming a key political liability for President Barack Obama.

Last week, the White House gamely tried to characterize Thursday's Afghan elections as a milestone for democracy. But the administration's tepid relationship with presumptively re-elected President Hamid Karzai is one symptom of a larger struggle for Obama.

"Our goal is clear: To disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda and their extremist allies," Obama said of Afghanistan. "This is not a challenge that we asked for; it came to our shores when al Qaeda launched the 9/11 attacks from Afghanistan."

Obama has tried to bring stability to Afghanistan by sending more troops and shaking up the military command. He broadened the regional strategy to include Pakistan and rooting out terrorist safe havens.

But even so, a Washington Post/ABC News poll last week found 51 percent of Americans said the war in Afghanistan is not worth fighting. Among Democrats, 70 percent are against the war.

Military leaders are completing an evaluation of the conflict in Afghanistan and may ask Obama for more troops -- a tall order given the eroding public support for the war and a growing opposition within the president's own party to more funding.

Coalition forces in July reported 76 deaths in Afghanistan -- the deadliest month to date since the conflict began.

"I think most Americans were on board with the limited objective of getting rid of al Qaeda and the Taliban after 9/11," said Malou Innocent, a Middle East expert at the Cato Institute. "Since that time, however, it's morphed into a more robust state-building effort that many Americans didn't sign up for."

The president and his family Sunday fly to Martha's Vineyard for a week of vacation. Also heading to the island resort is Cindy Sheehan, the durable anti-war protester who spend consecutive summers protesting near

former President George W. Bush's Texas ranch.

"The only change I have seen in foreign policy is, unfortunately, things are getting worse in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan," Sheehan said Friday on MSNBC. "We need to revive our anti-war sentiment."

Sheehan's critique from the Left is problematic for Obama in part because it underscores a criticism from some Democrats that he is merely extending Bush war policies.


Some lawmakers have said they want the president to clearly explain why the United States is still in Afghanistan and what the end-game will be. For now, Obama describes the conflict as one that will go on.

"It's at great cost," Obama said in a radio interview last week. "I mean, you know, I have to sign letters to family members who have fallen, and a lot more are falling in Afghanistan than in Iraq. And as a consequence, we've got to make sure that we are really focused on finishing the job in Afghanistan. But it's going to take some time."

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