

What does U.S. Commander's resignation say about war in Afghanistan?

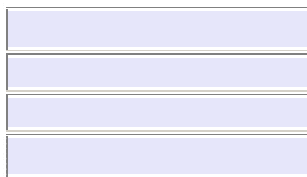
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The U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan U.S. General Stanley McChrystal wears earplugs as he leaves by helicopter after a meeting between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and tribal leaders in Kandahar city June 13, 2010. (Xinhua/Reuters, File Photo)
By Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Xinhua) -- Former Commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan Stanley McChrystal's resignation on Wednesday begs the question of what the move says about a war that has raged for more than eight years, some experts said.



The resignation came on the heels of a dust up with U.S. President Barack Obama over the general's harsh words for the Obama administration's handling of the war.

The rift began when an article in Rolling Stone magazine quoted McChrystal as describing as "painful" the period last fall when the president was weighing the decision to deploy additional troops to the war torn country.

The general said the president seemed ready to put him in an "unsellable" position and also criticized members of Obama's administration in the article.

Obama on Wednesday accepted McChrystal's resignation and in a televised speech from the White House said "all Americans should be grateful for General McChrystal's remarkable career in uniform."

"But war is bigger than any one man or woman, whether a private, a general, or a president. And as difficult as it is to lose General McChrystal, I believe that it is the right decision for our national security."

"The conduct represented in the recently published article does not meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general. It undermines the civilian control of the military that is at the core of our democratic system."

Barmak Pazhwak, program officer at the U.S. Institute of Peace, said the general's resignation could disrupt U.S. efforts in Afghanistan in the short term.

The rift also shows the status quo is unacceptable and that the war effort is moving in the wrong direction, he said.

"Even the general is not happy with the way things are going in Afghanistan, with the way probably he received support from his superiors," he said.

Nathan Hughes, director of military analysis at global intelligence company Stratfor, said the U.S. strategy is beginning to show cracks.

Nevertheless, the installment of Gen. David Petraeus', who has been chosen as successor, demonstrates continuity, as the CENTCOM commander has been involved in shaping the counter insurgency strategy used in Afghanistan, he said.

Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the CATO Institute, said McChrystal is by no means irreplaceable. Even so, the Taliban, which believes it already has the upper hand, could use the rift to its advantage.

"The situation with McChrystal will strengthen the Taliban's propaganda offensive, as they can point to weaknesses in the coalition's unity of effort and execution of strategy," she said.

In spite of the shift in leadership, the general's replacement is unlikely to force a change in strategy, as Obama has embraced counterinsurgency efforts, she said. The United States will soon have more than 100,000 troops in the country, on top of the 40,000 from allies.

Innocent believes the war is unwinnable and that this episode is a sidebar to a deeper issue - "that Afghanistan does not constitute a vital interest to the United States. McChrystal's capacity to wage this war was hampered from the beginning," she said.

An article on the Web site of global intelligence company Stratfor noted the current split is not the first between a commanding general and the White House. More than 50 years ago, President Harry Truman faced off against Gen. Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War.

MacArthur expressed contempt for Truman, his Commander-in-Chief, demonstrating "complete disregard for the chain of command as well as the fundamental U.S.-held principle of civilian control of the military," Stratfor wrote.

He refused to subordinate his military strategy for Korea to the larger political strategy of the early Cold War period. Ultimately Truman has no choice but to sack him in April 1951, Stratfor wrote.

"The senior leadership in Afghanistan and CENTCOM appears to view the campaign as a self-evidently urgent fight and the American priority of the day," Stratfor wrote.

"Such a view leaves the Afghan campaign unconnected to the broader strategic interests of the United States. It paints a picture of a leader who does not view his command and its challenges as a piece of the problem but as the whole of the problem, requiring all available resources and no civilian interference, even from the Commander-in-Chief," Stratfor wrote.

"In this way there is indeed a parallel with MacArthur, who could not understand that Korea could not be treated as the center of the Cold War but only as a subordinate theater," Stratfor wrote.