

U.S. politicians, military leaders split over withdrawal from Afghanistan

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by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Xinhua) -- As the White House weighs how rapidly to pull U.S. troops out of embattled Afghanistan, politicians and military leaders are divided on the issue, with President Barack Obama saying little on the matter.

Many lawmakers and much of the public are weary of a decade of war, and some U.S. media are making the case that the recent crippling of al-Qaeda's leadership justifies a rapid withdrawal.

Earlier this month, Michigan Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he wanted President Obama to stick to his plan of reducing U.S. troop presence by a significant number this year. And on Friday, Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer called for the withdrawal of 30,000 U.S. troops from war ravaged Afghanistan by year's end.

In a talk in Washington last week, however, South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham urged the Congress not to undercut U.S. efforts in Afghanistan by accelerating the pace of U.S. withdrawal, arguing that such a move would erase U.S. gains.

Echoing Graham's thoughts, outgoing U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Sunday urged patience, saying the U.S. needs to consider the consequences of failure if U.S. forces withdraw before the time is right.

Obama announced in December 2009 that the drawdown would begin next month, but added that the pace and scope would be based on conditions on the ground.

"One of the conditions on the ground is that we have made a lot of progress over the last 15 months," Gates said on CNN's State of the Union. "We have basically thrown the Taliban out of their home turf of Kandahar and Helmond provinces."

While the U.S. entered Afghanistan a decade ago, the war was waged in a limited fashion until last year, as many resources and much manpower had been sapped by the U.S. war in Iraq, he said.

"I understand we have been at war for 10 years, but we have not been at war full scale in Afghanistan, except since last summer," he said.

Gates also announced on Sunday that preliminary talks with the Taliban are underway, although they do not yet involve top U.S. officials and are likely to take months before any progress is made, he said.

Some experts said the U.S. would have much difficulty getting concessions from top Taliban leaders such as Mullah Omar, but that bringing some of the mid to low-level leadership could splinter the organization.

IS AL-QAEDA ON THE ROPES?

Meanwhile, the New York Times reported on Saturday that senior U.S. officials said much of al-Qaeda's network in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been hobbled.

The officials were quoted as saying that drone strikes and the raid in Pakistan that killed terror kingpin Osama bin Laden have rendered the radical group "ineffective." Indeed, 20 out of 30 top al-Qaeda members identified by intelligence agencies have been killed over the last year and a half.

The information found in bin Laden's compound pointed to an organization with a leadership in "disarray" and officers who feared for their own lives, the Times reported.

That has fueled discussion that Washington could now have cause to accelerate the clip at which it pulls U.S. troops out of Afghanistan.

Gates, however, took no position on the issue, saying the decision regarding when and how to withdraw U.S. forces would be left up to Obama.

The U.S. went into Afghanistan in October 2001, around a month after the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington that killed nearly 3,000 people in a bid to deny sanctuary to al-Qaeda, which had established a base of operations in Afghanistan.

Polls have consistently shown that Americans are war weary and that Afghanistan does not top the list of major concerns among the U.S. public. Congress has also shown signs of war fatigue, and in recent years some lawmakers have suggested pulling the plug on U.S. operations in the war-torn country.

But some analysts said that may not be wise -- while al-Qaeda is severely weakened, its back is not broken.

James Carafano, a fellow at the Heritage Foundation, told Xinhua that the group could potentially return to its circa 2001 ability to stage major attacks against the U.S., such as the September 11 attacks.

"That could happen in a heartbeat," he said.

Leaving Afghanistan at this point should be prudent, he argued. "You've got the enemy on the run and you just want to pick up the ball and go home," he said.

When asked how he wanted the war in Afghanistan to end, Gates responded that it would conclude "essentially the same way that it ended in Iraq, with us playing a key role for some period of time, building up the local security forces ... degrading the capability of the Taliban to the point where the Afghan forces can take care of them, and then transferring the responsibility for security to the Afghans."

That transition has already begun, he said. "What you will see between now and 2014 is the transition of the rest of the country over a period of time," he said.

CRITICS SAID WAR FAR FROM SMOOTH FOR U.S.

Still, critics argued that Afghanistan is no Iraq, and hosts a population with a significantly lower degree of literacy, a rudimentary economy and little infrastructure.

Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, said that this month was the bloodiest in the embattled country since 2007 and that insurgents are making gains in the north.

The U.S. can win the Afghan war so long as it focuses more narrowly on al-Qaeda, rather than the Taliban and its associated offshoots, and so long as it limits the mission to counter terrorism, rather than the counter-insurgency or nation-building campaign, she told Xinhua.

While it is possible for the U.S. to hand over security responsibility to Afghan forces by 2014, the official deadline, "that does not mean everything will run smoothly," Innocent said.