



Obama unlikely to go open-ended in Afghanistan

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

ISSUE: Afghanistan war

OUR VIEW: President likely to listen to warnings, unlikely to keep sending more and more forces

As The T&D Region mourns the loss of a soldier in Afghanistan, the national debate about the war grows.

Adding to growing questions about the war is a report by The Washington Post on the leaked findings of commanding Gen. Stanley McChrystal's report on the war. McChrystal warned "in an urgent, confidential assessment of the war that he needs more forces within the next year and bluntly states that without them, the eight-year conflict will likely result in failure." He recommends pursuing a counter-insurgency strategy.

But, as pointed out by the The National Security Network, an organization devoted to revitalizing America's national security policy, getting Afghanistan policy right will require more than a purely military approach. NSN says a significant and important debate is taking place among credible military and foreign policy experts over whether a full-bore counter-insurgency strategy is the right course for America's national security.

To his credit, President [Barack Obama](#) is weighing all the options on the way forward in Afghanistan.

As Obama said Sunday, "The first question is, are we doing the right thing? Are we pursuing the right strategy? ... We are not going to put the cart before the horse and just think that sending more troops will automatically make America safe."

Circumstances in Afghanistan reportedly have changed markedly in the past several months. July and August were the two deadliest months of the nearly 8-year-old U.S. mission, and the country's presidential elections, considered critical to Afghans' perceptions of their government, resulted in massive allegations of illegitimacy and fraud.

Writing on the elections at the end of last month, Dexter Filkins of the New York Times stated: "The situation on the battlefield is difficult on its own. But it is, of course, inevitably bound up with the political stalemate in Kabul. As American commanders and diplomats have said repeatedly here, no amount of troops can substitute for a lack of political consensus among ordinary Afghans."

NSN says it is clear the current mission has focused too much on the military part of the equation, to the detriment of the civilian side, and that a comprehensive strategy for determining the way forward is needed. This view is shared by senior civilian and military officials:

Among them are Malou Innocent and Ted Galent Carpenter of the CATO Institute. They lay out the case for a scaled back counter-terrorism policy in Afghanistan: "Given the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan, a definitive, conventional victory' is not a realistic option. Denying a sanctuary to terrorists who seek to attack the United States does not require Washington to pacify the entire country, eradicate its opium fields, or sustain a long-term military presence in Central Asia. From the sky, U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles can monitor villages, training camps and insurgent compounds. On the ground, the United States can retain a small number of covert operatives for intelligence gathering and discrete operations against specific targets, as well as an additional small group of advisers to train Afghan police and military forces. The United States should withdraw most of its forces from Afghanistan within the next 12 to 18 months and treat al Qaeda's presence in the region as a chronic, but manageable, problem. Washington needs to narrow its objectives to three critical tasks: Security, intelligence and regional relations."

The Obama administration may not buy into the idea that conventional victory in Afghanistan is not possible, but with the voices growing louder that something must change in the war effort, one has only to remember the president's stand on Iraq when he was a candidate. He is not likely to keep throwing more and more military people and power at the problem.