

by Lisa Curtis

A faulty Afghan election and decreasing American public support for the war in Afghanistan are leading President Obama to question his Administration's strategy for defeating the terrorist threat centered in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

American domestic politics and a complicated regional picture are apparently coloring President Obama's thinking on U.S. strategy toward these two countries, potentially prompting him to scale back U.S. goals in the region. That would be a mistake. While there is a need to carefully review and refine tactics and strategies, President Obama must shun the temptation to believe that the U.S. can somehow defeat al-Qaeda without preventing Afghanistan from being engulfed by the Taliban-led insurgency.

In his comprehensive assessment of the situation in Afghanistan, which was leaked to the U.S. media earlier this week, U.S. Commander General Stanley McChrystal lays out a strategy for moving forward that would require the deployment of fresh U.S. troops. This is not surprising. On several occasions, President Obama himself has pronounced that the war in Afghanistan has not received the appropriate resources—such as U.S. leadership, troop levels, and financial commitments—necessary to achieve U.S. objectives. General McChrystal argues for increasing the focus on protecting the Afghan population from Taliban advances, a recommendation based in part on the recent American experience in Iraq, where General Petraeus's "people-centric" approach to counterinsurgency paid dividends and ultimately discredited al-Qaeda and its harsh tactics. General McChrystal also makes the case that new U.S. troop deployments must come quickly or the U.S. risks facing a situation in which it will be impossible to defeat the Taliban insurgency.

Separating Taliban Leadership from al-Qaeda: An Unrealistic Goal

In a March 27 speech, President Obama was clear on the link between the Taliban and al-Qaeda and the threat posed by al-Qaeda to the governing regimes in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. He rightly said, "And if the Afghan government falls to the Taliban—or allows al Qaeda to go unchallenged—that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can."

But his remarks on Afghanistan at Wednesday's United Nations General Assembly reveal that he may be second-guessing U.S. strategy in the region. While he repeated his commitment to not allowing al-Qaeda to find sanctuary in Afghanistan or "any other nation" (i.e., Pakistan), he failed to mention the Taliban insurgency that is threatening to destabilize Afghanistan and the necessity of preventing such an outcome.

His apparent backtracking on Afghanistan can also be found in statements he made on this past Sunday's morning talk shows in which he openly questioned whether fighting the Taliban insurgency is necessary to stopping al-Qaeda.

According to media reports, President Obama is considering implementing a plan supported by Vice President Joe Biden to scale back the American military presence in Afghanistan and focus on targeting al-Qaeda cells primarily in western Pakistan. This strategy would be insufficient to curb the terrorist threat emanating from the region. Ceding territory to the Taliban in Afghanistan would embolden international terrorists in the region, including in nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Over the last year U.S. predator strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan have been effective at disrupting the al-Qaeda leadership, and President Obama deserves credit for aggressively employing this tactic. However, the predator strikes in Pakistan must be accompanied by sustained U.S. and NATO military action against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Taliban and al-Qaeda have a symbiotic relationship, and they support each other's harsh Islamist, anti-West goals. It would be folly to think a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan would be anything but a deadly international terrorist safe haven.

Success in Afghanistan requires that those Taliban who support international terrorists are not in a position to threaten the stability of the government. This will ultimately require a strong, well-equipped, and well-trained Afghan national army and police force. But this will take time.

In the meantime, the U.S. must prevent the Taliban from regaining influence in Afghanistan, which requires increasing U.S. troop levels. Success in Afghanistan does not require the complete elimination of anyone who has ever associated with the Taliban. But it does require that the Taliban leaders still allied with al-Qaeda and supportive of its destructive global agenda do not have the ability to reassert power in Afghanistan.

Focus on Improving U.S. Strategy toward Pakistan

Instead of considering whether to scale back the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, the Obama Administration must figure out how it can increase its diplomatic leverage with Islamabad. It is mind-boggling that after eight years of seeking to partner with Pakistan in countering terrorism in the region and providing nearly \$15 billion in U.S. economic and military assistance to the country, the insurgency in southern Afghanistan is directed by Afghan Taliban leaders located in Pakistan that are "reportedly aided by some elements of Pakistan's ISI," as General McChrystal concludes in his report.

The McChrystal report acknowledges that most insurgent fighters in Afghanistan are "directed by a small number of Afghan senior leaders based in Pakistan that work through an alternative political infrastructure in Afghanistan." However, the report fails to spell out a strategy for neutralizing this leadership and for convincing Pakistan to use all of the tools at its disposal to assist the U.S. in that effort.

Pakistan has made substantial gains against insurgents threatening stability inside Pakistan. There is more clarity within the Pakistani military leadership and among the Pakistani public about the threat posed to the country from Taliban elements. A recent public opinion poll by the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that 69 percent of Pakistanis worry that extremists could

take control of their country. The poll further indicated that 70 percent of Pakistanis now rate the Taliban unfavorably compared to only 33 percent a year ago.

U.S. officials must now build on this momentum by convincing Pakistan to take the fight to the Afghan Taliban leadership that finds sanctuary in and around Quetta in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province. U.S. officials must convince Pakistan of the futility of allowing the Afghan Taliban leadership to flourish in the region and of the potential consequences for Pakistan's own stability of refusing to crack down on these elements.

Emboldening a Generation of International Terrorists

The Taliban/al-Qaeda threat spans the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan; thus, failure in one country will contribute to failure in the other—just as success in one country will breed success in the other. By appointing Ambassador Richard Holbrooke as the Senior Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan earlier this year, President Obama signaled that he understood this reality.

The imperfect elections in Afghanistan should not deter the Obama Administration from providing the resources necessary to achieve stability in Afghanistan. To be sure, the outcome of the election was certainly less than ideal. But pulling back from Afghanistan would be devastating, as it would embolden a generation of international terrorists who would then be able to strike at will whenever and wherever they choose.

Lisa Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.

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