

By Colin Clark

In what appears to be the first official expression of deep concern on the Hill about the war in Afghanistan, the House spending bill report says the appropriations committee is "concerned" about an "open-ended U.S. commitment" in a country long known for "successfully rebuffing foreign military intervention."

Although the House Appropriations Committee did not use the blunt tool of cutting spending for the war, which would bring howls of protest that they were shortchanging troops in the field, the committee wants a detailed update from the National Security Advisor and the Defense Secretary every 180 days. The report will include an administration assessment of "the overall prospects for lasting stability in Afghanistan."

When the administration released its Afghanistan strategy few lawmakers questioned it. For the most part, there was a brief love fest after the strategy's release with many lawmakers praising President Obama's administration for focusing on the remote land, sending more troops and putting more emphasis on so-called soft power elements.

Now one of the most powerful group of defense lawmakers is raising questions about that focus and is telling the White House that, while they do get reports mandated by section 1230 of the 2008 defense authorization act, this does not provide a clear view of "how much time and resources the United States will commit" if things don't go well. One expert familiar said that it was unclear whether Congress could order the National Security Advisor to participate in a study since he is a personal advisor to the president and not head of a government department, adding that the fact the HAC-D wanted the input of Jim Jones was a clear signal of the subcommittee's unease.

Another expert said the HAC-D was on the right track. "Subcommittee members are right to be concerned; because there is little evidence U.S. soldiers can change Afghan culture. But we don't really need to. When you encounter a country that is corrupt to the core, the answer isn't to reform them, it's to buy them off," said Loren Thompson, defense analyst with the Lexington Institute. His solution would be appreciated by the masterful British agent, T. E. Lawrence: "So pay the warlords and the poppy-growers and pursue the more focused mission of wiping out Taliban sympathizers. Once the money starts flowing, there won't be many of those. I give the Obama Administration about one fiscal quarter before it realizes it would rather spend American money in Afghanistan than American lives. Perhaps the slogan for a more sustainable policy might be 'Smart power begins with hard cash.'"

A former National Security Council staffer, Robbin Laird, said the administration has missed the boat on Afghanistan and on the withdrawal from Iraq. "Neither have been well thought out. The problem is that we have no withdrawal plan for Iraq nor a clear strategy for after our withdrawal.

And the administration has replaced the initial Afghanistan plan with its one-theater, two country strategy. I simply do not understand what that means in terms of resources and commitments," said Laird, who is now a defense consultant. However, he thinks we will soon get some answers: "The coming UK elections will force the U.S. hand in explaining publicly what we're doing" because the British public is clearly wavering in its support for the presence of Tommies in Afghanistan.

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