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Success in Afghanistan Requires Firm Presidential Leadership, Not Half-Measures

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President Obama soon must make one of his most important national security decisions: how to proceed in Afghanistan, a crucial theater in the war against al-Qaeda. This week the President received an assessment of the war from General Stanley McChrystal, his recently appointed commander in Afghanistan. While the details of this report remain classified, it is believed to set the framework for an expanded military effort within a new counterinsurgency strategy that puts a premium on protecting the Afghan people from Taliban terrorism and intimidation. To protect vital national interests by defeating al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies, President Obama must give his military commanders the best chance for success—not accede to advisers motivated by political expediency who would block additional troops and abandon the Administration's new Afghanistan strategy before it can be implemented.

Putting Afghanistan on the Right Path. The Obama Administration deserves praise for recognizing that Afghanistan needed more high-level attention, resources, and U.S. troops after conducting a policy review earlier this year—a review that culminated in the President's decision in March to dispatch an additional 21,000 troops to Afghanistan. The Administration also wisely appointed General McChrystal, a cerebral officer with extensive special operations and counterinsurgency experience who compiled a stellar record in Iraq, to take the lead in Afghanistan, working closely with his former superior in Iraq, General David Petraeus at the Central Command.

Ironically, while the Administration's promising new strategy has not yet been implemented, the alternative policy suggested by some critics and some officials within the Administration already has been tried and failed miserably, not only in Afghanistan, but in Iraq as well. Adopting this alternative "small footprint" strategy—which would reduce the number of U.S. troops and scale back the goals of the war to focus solely on al-Qaeda rather than the Taliban-led insurgent coalition—is not a realistic option.

Such an abdication would allow the Taliban to carve out sanctuaries within Afghanistan that would gradually be expanded to threaten the Afghan government. In turn, the risk of a Taliban victory would increase, a development that inevitably would bring al-Qaeda back in force to Afghanistan. A Taliban victory in Afghanistan also would increase the Islamist threat to Pakistan, which recently has made progress in combating the Pakistani Taliban.

A Winnable War. The war in Afghanistan cannot be effectively waged merely with air power, predator drones, and special forces. In the late 1990s, the Clinton Administration hurled cruise missiles at easily replaceable al-Qaeda training

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camps in Afghanistan, but this “chuck and duck” strategy failed to blunt the al-Qaeda threat. The Bush Administration’s minimalist approach to Afghanistan in 2001 was a contributing factor that allowed Osama bin Laden to escape from his mountain redoubt at Tora Bora. Afterwards, Washington opted to focus narrowly on counterterrorism goals in Afghanistan—rather than counterinsurgency operations—in order to free up military assets for the war in Iraq. This allowed the Taliban to regroup across the border in Pakistan and make a violent resurgence. The “small footprint” strategy also failed in Iraq, before it was abandoned in favor of General Petraeus’s counterinsurgency strategy, backed by the surge of American troops, in early 2007.

Despite this record of failure, some stubbornly continue to support an “offshore” strategy for landlocked Afghanistan today. But half-measures—the hallmark of the “small footprint” strategy—will not work. Precise intelligence is needed to use smart bombs smartly. Yet few Afghans would risk their lives to provide such intelligence unless they are assured of protection against the Taliban’s ruthless retaliation. Providing such protection requires more American boots on the ground beyond the 68,000 that will be deployed by the end of the year. In Iraq, the surge of American troops encouraged Iraqis to climb down off the proverbial fence and offer a flood of valuable intelligence tips that enabled a much more effective targeting of al-Qaeda in Iraq and other insurgent forces.

Another critical element necessary to defeat the Taliban is larger and more effective Afghan security forces, which are severely undermanned and poorly equipped. Today there is a total of only 173,000 men in the Afghan army and police, compared to over 600,000 in Iraq, which is a smaller and less populated country. The new strategy proposed by the McChrystal/Petraeus team is likely to put a high priority on expanding and improving these forces with better training, embedded advisers, and the

partnering of Afghan units with nearby American units. The Afghan army and police will grow stronger, eventually reducing the need for U.S. troops.

The Need for Firm and Patient Presidential Leadership. The Administration’s new strategy for Afghanistan is promising, but it will not be easily or quickly implemented. Already, casualties are mounting as American troops have deployed in areas formerly controlled by the Taliban in southern and eastern Afghanistan. President Obama must carefully review the McChrystal report and give his military commanders the resources and troops they need to effectively carry out their counterinsurgency strategy. An incremental approach that defers any requested troop reinforcements could jeopardize the success of the strategy.

To shore up waning popular support for the war, the President should announce the results of his Afghanistan policy review in a nationally televised speech. He should explain to the American people what is at stake in Afghanistan, why it is necessary to make continued sacrifices to defeat distant enemies there, and why the war is not only necessary, but winnable. His leadership would lay the groundwork for a bipartisan approach to Afghanistan that would attract renewed popular and congressional support. But if the President fails to rein in wavering members of his own party who appear to be more interested in an exit plan than a victory plan, then there is a growing danger that the Administration’s new strategy will be defeated in Washington before it can be fully implemented in Afghanistan. This would be a disastrous outcome that would further energize Islamist extremists far beyond Afghanistan and increase the terrorist threat to the United States and its allies.

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