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President Obama's Afghanistan Speech: An Uncertain Message

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President Obama's West Point speech announcing his long-awaited decision on Afghanistan sent mixed messages that raise more questions about his Administration's commitment to success than they answered. On the one hand, the President announced that he will dispatch 30,000 more U.S. troops within the next six months to reinforce the 68,000 already there and ask American allies, who currently have about 37,000 troops in theater, to bolster their commitment. On the other hand, this surge falls at least 10,000 troops short of General Stanley McChrystal's "medium risk" option, and 30,000 troops short of his "low risk" option.

Moreover, Obama indicated that U.S. troops will begin to withdraw in 18 months—an unrealistically brief timeframe in which to accomplish their mission. The announcement of a withdrawal date also provides a psychological advantage to the Taliban who will convince their recruits that America has lost its will and thus they can just "wait us out." Instead of acting as a decisive commander-in-chief firmly committed to success, President Obama came across as an uncertain political leader eager to split the differences within his divided Administration to implement an exit strategy, despite the likely disastrous consequences of such a plan.

The President's awkward effort to square the circle of his Afghanistan policy led him to state that "it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home." The close juxtaposition of his statement to send more

troops with that of a pledge to begin withdrawing them after 18 months will be confusing to the American public, America's NATO allies, and most unfortunately, to Afghans and Pakistanis, who are all too familiar with the U.S.'s history of turning its back on this volatile region. Also left unsaid was why such a vital national interest would change after 18 months. Or why the Obama Administration failed to fully grant the request of its handpicked commander in Afghanistan, General McChrystal, for at least 40,000 more troops. (McChrystal's lowest risk option reportedly called for 60,000 to 80,000 more troops.)

An Uncertain Strategy. President Obama has adopted a "McChrystal Light" strategy that embraces the new counterinsurgency plan announced by the Administration last March but fails to give McChrystal all the troops that he deemed necessary to succeed with a low level of risk. It also remains to be seen whether the troop surge can be successful in such a short period of time.

To his credit, Obama avoided the even more unwelcome option of incrementally deploying troops over a long period of time, which would have been a recipe for disaster. He appears to have

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accepted McChrystal's warning that "failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near term (next 12 months)—while Afghan security capacity matures—risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible."¹

Given his clarity about the threat posed to U.S. national security by a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, it is difficult to comprehend why Obama would have designated such an early date to begin withdrawing U.S. forces—particularly since most observers acknowledge that it will take at least three to four years to fully train and equip the Afghan National Army to a level sufficient to engage the Taliban. If the U.S. departs the region before the situation in Afghanistan is stabilized, it would likely result in a downward spiral of decreasing security in Afghanistan, including:

- A resurgent Taliban,
- Eventual collapse of the Afghan government,
- An even bloodier civil war,
- Renewed humanitarian crisis, and
- A refugee exodus.

Moreover, the Taliban will not only bring back their ally al-Qaeda, but it will also provide sanctuary to almost every major Islamist insurgent movement in the world today: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Pakistani Taliban, Chechen militants, etc. This would be a disastrous outcome not only for Americans and Afghans but for Pakistan, India, and the nations of Europe—all of whom are targets of Islamist terrorists.

Exit Plans Create Doubts. In addition to stinting on troop reinforcements, the Administration has mishandled the Afghanistan policy review by engaging in an agonizing public second-guessing of its own strategy.

Earlier this year, the Administration raised expectations of a forthcoming decision only to postpone and drag out the decision-making process to an unprecedented degree. This has led to a proliferation of damaging leaks as contending factions within the Administration sought to sway the President's decision.

The public equivocation and intense hand-wringing fostered uncertainty about U.S. commitment to the Afghanistan mission among America's NATO allies and other allies and partners in the region. As a result, it will be difficult to convince NATO allies to pony up the additional 5,000–7,000 troops Obama is counting on to provide the manpower necessary for McChrystal's counterinsurgency strategy to be a success.

This uncertainty now has been further amplified by the President's addition of a timeline for withdrawing U.S. combat forces, which was not included in the Administration's original strategy last March.

Last night, President Obama said that "just as we have done in Iraq, we will execute this transition responsibly, taking into account conditions on the ground." But in Iraq, President Bush ordered the surge without placing artificial timelines for withdrawing the troops. Only after conditions on the ground improved did the Bush Administration reach an agreement with the Iraqi government for the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces. By establishing a timeline for withdrawal before the troops have even been deployed, the Obama Administration has placed the horse before the cart.

Such indications of wavering commitment will be interpreted in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a sign of weakness. This perceived weakness will in turn undermine the Afghan government, encourage many Afghans to hedge their bets by cultivating better ties with the Taliban, and undermine Pakistan's resolve to confront the Afghan Taliban leadership that finds sanctuary within its borders.

Stick to McChrystal's Strategy. The basic concept of the McChrystal strategy is sound: U.S. troops must increase the focus on protecting Afghan civilians to reduce the space in which the Taliban can operate freely and help build the capacity of the Afghan government to serve and protect the people. A major part of this effort must be a "civilian surge" to help build the capacity of the Afghans to govern, fight corruption, restore the rule of law, and revitalize the Afghan economy.

1. Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "General Calls for More U.S. Troops to Avoid Afghan Failure", *The New York Times*, September 21, 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/21/world/asia/21afghan.html> (December 2, 2009).

But security must come first. The rapid deployment of 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan is certainly welcome, but President Obama needlessly provided a psychological boost to the enemy by signaling a lack of long-term U.S. commitment to the mission by emphasizing a near-term date for beginning a U.S. withdrawal process.

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