

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2963
July 16, 2010

The Cameron–Obama White House Meeting: The U.S. and U.K. Must Reject a Timetable for the War in Afghanistan

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On July 20, British Prime Minister David Cameron will meet with President Barack Obama at the White House in what will be Cameron's first visit to Washington as Prime Minister. Cameron and Obama have met on at least two previous occasions, most recently at the G-20 summit in Canada. However, this visit marks the most important meeting of the two leaders to date and comes amid heavy strain on the Anglo–American Special Relationship.

The war in Afghanistan, where nearly 100,000 U.S. troops and 10,000 British troops are deployed, is a stark reminder of why the Special Relationship remains the world's most important bilateral alliance. Over 1,100 U.S. troops and 318 British troops have sacrificed their lives during the nine-year war in Afghanistan.¹ U.K. Defence Secretary Liam Fox has also warned that there are greater sacrifices ahead as the U.S. and NATO surge at least an additional 37,000 troops in support of the counterinsurgency strategy led by U.S. General David Petraeus.²

While Cameron and Obama stand united behind the counterinsurgency strategy, divisions remain over Obama's stated withdrawal date of July 2011.³ Dr. Fox has cautioned NATO against "premature withdrawal," and Cameron has indicated only a loose transition date of 2015. It is essential that Cameron and Obama use Tuesday's White House summit to express full support for the war in Afghanistan and dispel the impression that the U.S. is looking for a quick exit from the conflict.

Speak with One Voice. Cameron and British Foreign Secretary William Hague describe the war in Afghanistan as "the number one foreign policy and security policy priority" for the British government.⁴ Despite the previous Labour government's steadfast commitment to the war in Afghanistan, they were unable to arrest a sharp decline in support among the British public and repeatedly failed to explain the strategic rationale for the war and the implications of failure in Afghanistan.

The new Cameron government has gone out of its way to explain Britain's continued commitment to the war and how the counterinsurgency strategy can succeed in reversing Taliban battlefield momentum. In order to stabilize British and American support for the war, Cameron and Obama should speak with one voice on Afghanistan, especially in the tough months ahead.

Damaging Timelines. When President Obama approved sending 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan last December, he simultaneously signaled his impatience with the counterinsurgency strategy by declaring that U.S. troops would begin withdrawing from Afghanistan in July 2011—less

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm2963>

Produced by the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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than a year after the new troops are fully deployed. Obama also committed to sending far fewer than the 60,000–80,000 troops that then-NATO commander General Stanley McChrystal originally deemed necessary to provide the best chance for success.⁵

The security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated in the last five years, and it will take time to reverse the Taliban gains. The first step is to weaken the perception that Taliban victory is inevitable. One of the biggest impediments to weakening that perception is the July 2011 withdrawal date. This date has provided a psychological boost to the enemy by signaling a lack of long-term U.S. commitment to the mission.

Furthermore, the U.S. requires sincere cooperation from Pakistan in closing down the Taliban's sanctuary on its territory. Unless Pakistan has confidence in NATO's commitment to winning in Afghanistan, it will continue to hedge on its support for the Afghan Taliban and tolerate terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda.

The circumstances surrounding the recent departure of General McChrystal from command of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan reflect the lack of unity among U.S. civilian and military leaders regarding U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. Obama should discard the artificial deadline for beginning U.S. troop withdrawals, which has contributed to the tensions between U.S. civilian and military leaders

by placing commanders under enormous pressure to achieve results in an unrealistic timeframe.

The highly accomplished General Petraeus—credited with developing and implementing the counterinsurgency strategy that helped turn the Iraq war around—has repeatedly said that any U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan should be driven by conditions on the ground.⁶

U.S.–U.K. Resolve in Afghanistan. The Obama Administration should actively counter the perception that the U.S. is war-weary and ready to strike a grand bargain with the Taliban. Such perceptions weaken the U.S. position in the region and dampen prospects for the overall success of NATO's new counterinsurgency strategy.

An artificial deadline dramatically undercuts the U.S. and U.K. by signaling uncertainty to its partners and enemies alike. Cameron and Obama should use their summit to stop this damaging speculation and talk up the chances of victory in Afghanistan without mention of artificial timelines.

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