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Afghan Review Shows Troop Surge Working

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The White House review on Afghanistan released Thursday demonstrates that the 30,000 additional U.S. troops deployed to Afghanistan this year are beginning to make a difference in the direction of the war.

In order to build on these tentative gains, the Administration should take a stronger leadership role in driving political reconciliation inside Afghanistan, intensify efforts to work with Pakistan in denying Taliban sanctuary on its side of the border, and refrain from discussing troop deadlines, which undermines the overall strategy.

Turning Military Gains into Political Success.

The review provides a candid assessment of where U.S. efforts stand in the war just three months after the last of the 30,000 additional American troops arrived in theater. Administration officials have said the review is unlikely to prompt any major policy changes in the short run, which means President Barack Obama is willing to give the counterinsurgency strategy more time.

At the NATO summit in Lisbon last month, President Obama shifted the focus of U.S. strategy to an emphasis on 2014 as the end date for combat operations. While he continues to call for some U.S. forces to be withdrawn starting in July 2011, Obama has left himself wiggle room by saying that the “pace and scope” of that withdrawal is still undecided.

Progress on the battlefield has not yet translated into success for civilian government, which means the overall counterinsurgency strategy is still being tested. While the U.S. and coalition forces have

made clear military progress in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, where most of the new U.S. troops have been deployed, it remains to be seen whether local civilian government can fill in behind and sustain itself over time. Given that fighting inevitably slows in the winter months in Afghanistan, some of the gains may be partially attributable to a conscious temporary retreat by the Taliban.

The sudden death this week of Senior Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) Richard Holbrooke has sparked uncertainty over the future of the civilian/political strategy in Afghanistan. It is essential that the Obama Administration quickly identify a notable individual with regional experience and political influence to succeed Holbrooke. Some have suggested that the SRAP position be disbanded or downgraded, but that would be a mistake. The terrorism problem involves both Afghanistan and Pakistan; thus it is necessary to have a high-level Washington-based official who can shuttle between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Setbacks for al-Qaeda. The review also takes note of progress against al-Qaeda’s core leadership in Pakistan’s tribal areas thanks to an intensified drone missile campaign. President Obama indicated that it will take time to “ultimately defeat al-Qaeda”

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but pledged to pursue the terrorist organization relentlessly until it is eventually dismantled. The U.S. is also focusing on al-Qaeda affiliates in places like Yemen and Somalia, but senior Administration officials have made clear that the most significant al-Qaeda threat continues to emanate from the borderlands of Pakistan.

Way Forward. While the review demonstrates that the U.S. is in a better position today than it was a year ago to meet its objectives in Afghanistan, there is a long way to go. To consolidate the recent security gains in Afghanistan and turn the tide on the terrorist threat that plagues both Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Administration should:

- **Bring the U.S. and Pakistan into Alignment on the Future Course for Afghanistan.** The Obama team has so far relied on large-scale military and economic aid to induce greater Pakistani cooperation against Taliban sanctuaries on its soil. But this strategy has failed to impact Pakistani calculations on the utility of the Taliban in maintaining a regional security balance that favors Pakistan. Despite losing over 30,000 citizens to terrorist attacks since 9/11, Pakistan has been unable (or unwilling) to develop an effective policy to counter terrorism on a comprehensive basis. U.S. officials need to help Pakistan see beyond the Taliban and consider more carefully the costs to Pakistan of Taliban extremists regaining influence in Afghanistan.
- **Guide a Genuine Political Reconciliation Process in Afghanistan That Involves Key Regional Players.** The fact that one of the recent Taliban negotiators talking with the Hamid Karzai government turned out to be an imposter reveals that the U.S. strategy for political reconciliation is still undeveloped and unfocused. The Administration should take a greater leadership role in exploring opportunities for reconciliation rather than following the lead of Karzai, who is politically weak and unreliable. Other countries of the region should also be taken into confidence about the reconciliation process. While Pakistan desires a Kabul government friendly to its interests, other countries in the region also have a legitimate interest in preventing the return of Taliban domination of Afghanistan.
- **Stop Talking About Deadlines.** President Obama's announcement last year that the U.S. would begin withdrawing forces in July 2011 had a major negative impact on U.S. strategy. The shift in emphasis to 2014 as the end to combat operations is welcome. But continued references to the July 2011 withdrawal date will cast doubt among regional players about U.S. commitment to the mission.
- **Bolster the Military Effort.** The 140,000 coalition troops in Afghanistan urgently need additional heavy lift helicopters to transport and supply troops in the high mountains and more intelligence platforms such as reconnaissance drones and observation blimps. Washington should also press its allies to remove national caveats, which hinder military operations.
- **Help Afghans Stage Their Own Surge.** The coalition should continue to put a high priority on building up the Afghan National Army and recruiting more Pashtuns to its ranks. More foreign trainers and embedded advisers are also needed to increase its effectiveness and accelerate its growth.
- **Reform the Afghan Police and Judiciary.** Washington should continue its efforts to improve the training, equipment, and pay of Afghan police and embed foreign advisers to act as mentors and monitor their performance. The Afghan Local Police program, a voluntary local armed neighborhood watch program mentored by U.S. troops, should be greatly expanded. The judiciary and prison systems also urgently need reform to strengthen the rule of law and reduce the temptation of civilians to take their disputes to Taliban courts for adjudication.
- **Root Out Corruption.** Washington should maintain maximum pressure on the Afghan government to target corrupt officials for removal and prosecution. In cases where the Afghan government fails to act, coalition commanders should seek to isolate and marginalize Afghan officials involved in corruption wherever possible.
- **Prepare for a Post-Karzai Transition.** The U.S. should lead an international effort to build local governments, institutions, and non-government

organizations from the bottom up to reduce dependence on the sometimes erratic Karzai. The U.S. should stress its commitment to democratic Afghan institutions, not specific leaders. Karzai is precluded by law from running for a third term, and Washington should strongly oppose any effort to prolong his rule or rig the 2014 presidential elections.

Double Down on Diplomacy. The Afghanistan strategy is on the right track, and the recent security gains are encouraging. The Administration should

now double down on efforts to bolster political reconciliation inside Afghanistan and strengthen regional diplomacy to bring Afghanistan's neighbors in alignment with a serious reconciliation process.

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