

## ***How Did We Get Here? Afghanistan 8 Years Later:***

***A Brief Overview of the Events Leading to the Obama Administration's Quandary & the Policy Implications of Ignoring the Recommendations of the McChrystal Report***

*October 22, 2009*

### ***Background & Timeline:***

***September 2001:*** In September of 2001, the Taliban government in Afghanistan was led by Mullah Mohammad Rabbani and increasing its radicalism by instituting polices such as ordering religious minorities' to wear tags identifying themselves as non-Muslims, requiring all women to wear veils, enforcing Islamic law though public executions and amputations, and destroying giant Buddha statues in defiance of international efforts to save them. It was estimated the Taliban controlled at least 75% of the country, including most of the provincial capitals. It was widely agreed that the nation contained training grounds for a number of international terrorists, including Osama bin Laden, who was wanted for the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa. The ruling Taliban government refused U.S. and international requests for his extradition to face trial. On September 9, 2001, the leader of the Northern Resistance (the U.S.-backed insurgent group), Ahmad Shah Masood, was killed by Al-Qaeda terrorists posing as journalists.

Following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the United Nations Security Council immediately approved Resolution 1368 on September 12, 2001, which said that the Security Council "expresses its readiness to take all necessary steps to respond" to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. While the resolution did not specifically authorize Operation Enduring Freedom, it was widely interpreted as a U.N. authorization for military action in response to the attacks. After the Taliban continued to refuse to extradite Bin Laden for his role in the attacks, the Bush Administration decided to militarily overthrow the Taliban and to change the regime to one that would permit and assist with actions to go after Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda targets. On September 14<sup>th</sup>, Congress enacted S.J.Res. 23 that provided "all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he (the President) determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 *or harbored such organizations or persons.*" In response, the Taliban announced they were ready for a jihad (holy war).

***October 2001 – 2003:*** On October 7, 2001, U.S. and British forces launched airstrikes on Taliban targets and terrorist camps belonging to the Al-Qaeda network. By November, allied forces, fighting alongside the Northern Alliance, entered Kabul, and by early December, Taliban leaders surrendered the groups' final Afghan territory: the province of Zabul. However, Mullah Omar evaded capture and remained at large. In early December, major Afghan factions (not including the Taliban) met in Bonn, Germany, and agreed to a U.N. international peacekeeping force to maintain security in Kabul. Following the meeting, Hamid Karzai was chosen by leaders at the meeting to be sworn in as the head of the 30-member power-sharing interim government. In June of 2002, Karzai was selected by the grand counsel of elders to become head of state through 2004

when elections would take place. The following month, Karzai's Vice President was assassinated in Kabul. In July, Karzai escaped an assassination attempt in his home town of Kandahar. Throughout this time, U.S. and allied forces continued to fight and engaged remnants of Taliban or Al-Qaeda forces throughout Afghanistan, but primarily in the southeast. In 2003, NATO was forced to take control of security operations in Kabul from the U.N. – its first ever operation commitment outside of Europe.

**January 2004 – May 2006:** In January of 2004, the grand counsel adopted the Afghan Constitution that called for a representative government consisting of a President as head of state, a parliament, and granting equality for women. In October, the government held required Presidential elections which consisted of more than 18 presidential candidates. Approximately 10.5 million Afghan citizens registered to vote in the election and choose Karzai, who received 55% of the vote. In September of 2005, the nation held parliamentary elections conducted in relative peacefulness and met for its first inaugural session in December.

**May 2006:** During Operation Mountain Thrust, clashes between coalition forces accidentally killed scores of Afghans. After the incidents, violent anti-U.S. protests occurred in Kabul and became more frequent throughout the nation. By October, NATO assumed responsibility for all peacekeeping operations in the nation and replaced the U.S.-led coalition forces in the east. After the take over, Taliban and Al-Qaeda insurgents launched more aggressive raids and suicide attacks against NATO troops in regions where they wanted to extend government control.

**March 2007:** NATO began Operation Achilles, marking the largest military operation against the Taliban since the beginning of the war and largest offensive involving ground troops. Most of the fighting was targeted in the Helmand province in the southern region of Afghanistan. In May, Mullah Dudullah, the head of Taliban military forces, was killed by U.S. and Afghan troops. However, border clashes between Pakistani and Afghan troops escalated over ongoing border disputes in the Korengal Valley – a lawless and remote 500 square mile area that has been used by Al-Qaeda for launching and training terrorist attacks worldwide.

Kidnappings of journalists and aid workers increased in 2007, which included the capture of a group of South Korean Christian charity workers and led to the death of two of their members. In August, the United Nations reported that opium production was at record levels. It was estimated that 93% of the opiates on the world market were originating in Afghanistan, with an export value of about \$4 billion. Much of these earnings were used to fund ongoing insurgency operations by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The southern regions of the Helmand and Kandahar provinces that border Pakistan were and remain the highest-volume areas for drug transactions.

**April 2008:** After a NATO meeting that promised a continued “firm and shared long-commitment” to Afghanistan, the international community also pledged more than \$15 billion in humanitarian aid. NATO also stated that their peacekeeping mission was their top priority to secure the country. Attacks continued to rise, culminating in a suicide bomb attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul that killed more than 50. In response, coalition nations increased their deployments, including the U.K. (230), Germany (1,000), and the U.S (4,500). President Bush called these operations that began in September a “quiet surge” – after the success of increasing troop levels in Iraq.

Throughout the year, accusations of corruption within the government increased and President Karzai pledged to take action. Additionally, the *New York Times* had been reporting allegations that Karzai's brothers had been involved in narcotics trafficking, along with a number of government officials.

Later in the year, Karzai attempted to engage the Taliban in peace negotiations; however, the Taliban rejected any offers until all foreign troops had left the country. In response, Karzai and newly elected Pakistani President Zardari agreed to a coordinated strategy to fight militants in their mutual border region.

**January – March 2009:** In January of 2009, the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan was approximately 36,000, 19,000 of which were under direct U.S. military command and the remaining 17,000 were placed under NATO's International Security Assistance Force.

Less than a month after taking office, in February, President Obama announced that the United States was deploying an additional 17,000 troops to the southern region of Afghanistan where it borders Pakistan. At the time of President Obama's decision, he had been considering General McKiernan's (at the time the head commander in Afghanistan) request for as many as 30,000 additional troops. In response to this troop surge, 20 NATO countries also pledged to increase deployments. The main operations for these troops would be to set up bases and smaller combat outposts in order to allow troops to engage against both counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban and foreign fighters.

In March, the President announced a new strategy to deal with "the central challenge" facing the country by authorizing the deployment of an additional 4,000 troops to serve specifically as trainers and advisers to the Afghan Army to transition to handling security. This new strategy mirrored suggestions privately given to the Obama Administration by President Bush's National Security Council in late 2008. On the same month, Afghanistan's election commission announced elections were to take place on August 20<sup>th</sup>, rejecting Karzai's wishes to conduct the elections in April.

**May 2009:** On May 11, 2009, Defense Secretary Gates requested the resignation of the top general in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan. Gates recommended the President replace him with Lt. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal a veteran Special Operations commander that could provide "fresh thinking" on Afghanistan. One of the main reasons for his selection was reportedly due to the use of counterinsurgency tactics in Afghanistan, which is a change from the more traditional role of Army operations in war and focusing on counterterrorism strategies. Additionally, he had tremendous and successful combat experience in Iraq, commanding the unit that captured Saddam Hussein and killed Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Administration asked Gen. McChrystal to provide a report and evaluation on the situation to be released in late August.

**August 2009 – Today:** Following the deadliest two months in the entire 8-year war for U.S. military personnel (101 service members killed) and violence levels up 60 percent compared with last year, on the last day of August, Gen. McChrystal released his report to Gen. David Petraeus, head of U.S. Central Command, and Secretary Gates stating "the situation in Afghanistan is serious." Secretary Gates ordered a 60-day review of the report to assess the security situation as Taliban attacks continued.

After various media outlets [released](#) information contained in the report supporting a continued counterinsurgency strategy to protect and assisting the local population in hopes that they will provide information about terrorist hide-outs and planning, it also became clear that McChrystal believed the U.S. needed an additional commitment of up to 40,000 troops on top of the approximately 67,000 currently in Afghanistan. The Obama administration continues to evaluate

the report and determine whether additional troops are necessary, even as events continue to become increasingly serious and spread to Pakistan.

Additionally during the month of August, Afghanistan held its second presidential election. Preliminary results that were released in September showed Karzai winning the election with more than 54 percent. However, his main opponent Abdulla Abdulla and other organizations made allegations of massive voter fraud, including charges of voter coercion and ballot box-stuffing.

U.N. election monitors continued to conduct a thorough review of the elections, and on October 19<sup>th</sup> the organization announced it had discounted almost one-third of the votes for Karzai. This brought his total percentage of the total vote to 48% - below the 50% threshold needed for him to avoid a runoff with his top challenger. Under Afghan law, a U.N.-backed panel is the final arbiter on fraud allegations, and Karzai agreed on October 20<sup>th</sup> to a run-off election on Nov. 7, 2009, after Afghanistan's election commission ordered a second-round vote. A run-off election will not come without [logistical challenges](#) for U.N. election officials. Previously, it was unclear if Karzai would submit to a run-off or potentially arrange a poser sharing agreement with Abdulla.

### ***Where We Are Now:***

It has been nearly a month since the President began discussions about whether to further increase troop levels in Afghanistan. Throughout the U.S. military and the general Afghan population, anxiety levels are rising for fear that the President's indecision is giving our enemies hope that the United States will abandon Afghanistan. The American people and the Afghan people want to know which direction this war is heading: toward retreat and defeat, or toward a firm resolve to implement a strategy to bring success.

In May, General Stanley McChrystal was appointed by President Obama to implement a strategy to defeat terrorism and restore self-governance in Afghanistan. Presumably, President Obama believed that General McChrystal would help achieve the President's expressly-stated March 2009 goal "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future." But now, President Obama is questioning his commander's request for additional troops. General McChrystal, having been the commander of the Joint Special Operations Command in Iraq and Afghanistan, was in command when operative al-Zarqawi, Al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq, was killed. General McChrystal's reputation for an experienced, dependable, effective leader is what led to his appointment in the first place.

General McChrystal currently commands 103,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan, approximately 67,000 of which are U.S. troops (the number is expected to rise to 68,000 in December). He has recently requested approximately 40,000 additional troops to be deployed to Afghanistan in order to combat the insurgency and implement his plan for a stable Afghanistan. His plan, however, does not merely require an increase in troops; he has made it clear that counterinsurgency measures are the most effective way to combat terrorism in Afghanistan. As AEI military history scholar Fred Kagan points out in a recent article, the insurgents' goal in Afghanistan is "to take control of Afghanistan by intimidating the people, disintegrating the armed forces and the government, and insinuating their own shadow government structures into the vacuum. ***Their ability to enable al Qaeda is dependent on their ability to succeed as insurgents...***" (emphasis added). Kagan goes further to say, "That's what General McChrystal has laid out: a counterinsurgency strategy designed to achieve counterterrorist goals." A policy of attacking and killing the enemy only offers a temporary solution to the problem, if any solution at all. Some

experts, such as Kim Holmes, Vice President of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation, suggest that our previous counterterrorism strategy had even "...allowed the Taliban to regroup across the border in Pakistan and make a violent resurgence."

As Commander-in-Chief, President Obama is the ultimate decision-maker when it comes to an increase in troops. He recently held his fifth meeting with his advisors on Afghanistan and will have more discussions next week. On Sunday, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel stated on CNN's "State of the Union" that the [Administration should wait](#) on any decision regarding troop levels until Afghanistan settles its disputed elections. Shortly thereafter, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates contradicted Mr. Emanuel: "The Obama administration needs to decide on a war strategy for Afghanistan without waiting for a government there to be widely accepted as legitimate." Many experts have argued that Obama's equivocation may undermine the decision he eventually decides to make. Senator Cornyn recently described the indecision as "a way of emboldening our enemies," and there is no doubt that further delay jeopardizes our mission in Afghanistan and will weaken troop morale.

### ***What the Future Might Hold:***

As President Obama said in March of this year, should Afghanistan fall to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, it will become a "base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can."

***Tolerating the Taliban?*** The Taliban and Al-Qaeda cannot be viewed as separate entities in terms of our national security. And as Heritage expert Kim Holmes concludes, "The issue isn't whether the Taliban and al Qaeda are identical; it's whether they are cooperating." It is a fact that the Taliban will at least tacitly accept the presence of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Therefore, recent suggestions that the United States has the option of "tolerating" the Taliban, because they are not Al-Qaeda, are unfathomable. Should Afghanistan revert to Taliban rule, the country will become a safe haven for Al-Qaeda – the same group that masterminded the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

***The Fall of Pakistan to Insurgents:*** The Taliban and Al-Qaeda already have a strong presence in Pakistan. A retreat will destabilize the country and trigger fear across the globe (not to mention, heighten the already tense relationship between Pakistan and India) for one primary reason: Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons. Should the country fall into the hands of extremists, the threat of terrorists like Al-Qaeda obtaining nuclear weapons increases exponentially. While Pakistan has made great strides in quelling their insurgencies, Pakistan is certainly not in the clear. It is likely that a withdrawal from Afghanistan will embolden Al-Qaeda and the Taliban that are already operating in Afghanistan. In fact, The Wall Street Journal reported on October 15, 2009, that "...approximately 150 people have died in Pakistan in insurgent attacks in the past week..." With news like this, it is clear that NATO troops along the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan are vital to the country's continued success combating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

***Afghan Security Forces Still Need Assistance:*** Afghan security forces are not prepared to take on the battle against the Taliban on their own. Without the additional U.S. troops, they could crumble and the country would fall back into the hands of insurgents who will inevitably allow Al-Qaeda to gain a stronghold. The objective is to maintain a stable Afghanistan that can fight off insurgencies and terrorist cells on its own. The United States and NATO forces aim to help the Afghans govern themselves effectively and supply the tools for them to provide for their own security – by cracking down on corruption and helping to provide the people with a government they can trust. As Fred and Kimberly Kagan lay out in their recent report on [Afghanistan Force](#)

[Requirements](#), “The ANSF [the Afghan National Security Forces] does not exist or fight in a vacuum—its quality and performance depends heavily on its belief that the international community supports it and will continue to support it adequately, and on its belief that its cause is just.” Should the United States not decide to send additional troops, Afghanistan will be left with little hope that their own internal efforts are meaningful.

***Encouraging the Enemy:*** A U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would be seen as a defeat of a major superpower. It will send the signal that the United States could not handle the challenge it faced and will only strengthen the insurgents in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as radical elements throughout the Middle East. It will give incentive for dissidents, or even citizens who feel disenfranchised by the perceived “broken promise” of the United States to finish the job, to join the Taliban for protection and stability. With the growing dissatisfaction with the Afghan government, especially in light of the recent disputed presidential election, this is not an unlikely scenario.

***Threatens U.S., Regional, and Global Security:*** A premature U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will threaten regional and global security and feed into the hands of terrorists. It would show a lack of firm commitment to the mission President Obama presented in March of this year and shout defeat to our enemies. The President must heed General McChrystal’s recommendations; the stakes are too high to do otherwise.

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