
TENNESSEAN OP-ED: OBAMA PLAN OFFERS LONG-TERM SUCCESS

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Obama plan offers long-term success

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By U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper

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Still, I believe that President Obama's new approach to Afghanistan offers hope for the future — albeit one still years away.

First, Obama has found a new commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, and directed him to change our military strategy for the war. McChrystal focused on getting enough troops in the field and preventing civilian casualties from aerial bombing.

Before, our troops were spread thin across Afghanistan's difficult terrain and were stuck reacting to the insurgents. When our troops were attacked, they had to turn to American airpower. But bombs don't discriminate between bad guys and innocents, whose deaths were losing us the support of the Afghan population. Now, with more troops, our forces can take the initiative and defend the population. American airpower is still there to protect our troops but now can be reserved for true emergencies.

Gen. David Petraeus applied these lessons in Iraq, and Gen. McChrystal is now applying them in Afghanistan. As in Iraq, we can expect more U.S. casualties before things get better. But our military is the best in the world, and I am confident they will persevere even as I am mindful of the sacrifices we are asking of our brave men and women.

Focus on terrorism

Second, President Obama is working to change our relationship with Pakistan. Despite the news stories we see every day, most of Afghanistan isn't doing that badly. Almost all the violence is down along the Pakistan border. But that isn't good news. Unable to control its own border regions, Pakistan provides a safe haven for the insurgents attacking into Afghanistan. And Pakistan is a sovereign country with nuclear weapons and isn't as helpful as we would like.

We have a long but erratic history with Pakistan. When there has been a crisis like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan or 9/11, we've swallowed our concerns about Pakistan and worked closely with them — providing lots of funding. But when the crisis passed, we've remembered our concerns and cut off funding. The end of the movie Charlie Wilson's War captured that all too clearly. Not surprisingly, Pakistanis worry we will abandon them again.

Obama is trying to break that cycle. In June, the House passed a bill that authorizes the president to provide Pakistan the assistance it needs. Pakistan still has plenty of flaws, and we should watch closely. But we know from history that just condemning them doesn't solve the problems we face together.

Last, I am reassured that Obama and his team know why we are in Afghanistan — because al-Qaida terrorists killed Americans. We have a responsibility to help peaceful Afghans and cannot achieve our purpose without doing so. Obama's strategy puts that goal first.

The war in Afghanistan remains difficult, and we should not pretend it will be easy or short. But President Obama and his military commanders are already using a new strategy that promises success. I support the new strategy and our brave men and women on the ground who will carry it out.