

Is Obama About to Make a Disastrous Mistake?

Lincoln A. Mitchell

November 27, 2009

President Obama's decision about Afghanistan will likely be one of the most important ones he makes during his presidency and will almost certainly set the tone and the agenda for the rest of his time in office. The President has taken a long time on this decision. While it is possible that he simply cannot make up his mind, it is also possible that he is using this time to put all the pieces in place to support his decision. Whatever the president decides, whether it is withdrawal, adding 30,000-40,000 more troops or something in between, there will be a lot of political and logistical work that needs to be done. Doing this work, which, if Obama decides to send more troops, includes issues of moving soldiers and material to Afghanistan, determining what countries can be flown over and what cannot and what commitments can be expected by allies and other countries in the region, takes time and is better done in advance rather than once the decision is made and the policy is moving forward.

It is increasingly likely that Obama will decide to add more troops which represents a high risk strategy premised on the notions that Afghanistan can be stabilized and that it can be done with only 30,000-40,000 more troops. While both of these assumptions can, and undoubtedly should, be questioned, the decision to send more troops would also stand in contrast to the other major themes that have characterized Obama's foreign policy.

One of the major themes that Obama has communicated implicitly, if not explicitly, throughout his 11 months in office is that the U.S. role in the world is changing. He made this clear in a comment he made a few months into his term that indicated that while [Obama believes the U.S. can play a special role in the world, he also understands that the U.S. is not the only country that can, or should, contribute in this way.](#) The need for the U.S. to work collaboratively with our allies has been a major subtext of Obama's trips to Europe and most likely, for better or for worse, one of the reasons why he won the Nobel Peace Prize. During Obama's trip to Asia it was apparent that the administration understands China to be a rising superpower whose might will change the role of the U.S. in the world.

The recognition of the relative changes in U.S. role in the world, which still must be tempered by recognizing the extraordinary power, wealth and influence the U.S. enjoys, is a difficult, but essential realization. U.S. power is declining, [not as dramatically as some might think](#) and perhaps not irrevocably, but in this regard, the world has changed in the last decade or so. It is essential that a U.S. administration confront this difficult reality and craft policies that both seek to slow or reverse this decline while also working collaboratively with other countries to solve mutual problems. Obama, while not handling this difficult situation perfectly, has at least begun to confront it in a serious way.

This is one of the reasons why Obama's views on Afghanistan are so puzzling. Adding troops in Afghanistan to pursue a mission that looks more difficult every day is the perfect recipe for overextending the U.S. and accelerating our declining power and influence, at a time when we cannot afford it. It is a policy that simply does not recognize how the world, and the ability of the U.S. to change the world, has changed. The threat of terrorism is real, but a policy of keeping the U.S. safe from terrorism and expanding the war and rebuilding in Afghanistan are not at all the same thing.

It is also increasingly clear that while the effort in Afghanistan is a NATO effort, [a substantial majority of the troops will be American](#), making the effort more unilateral than what Obama might like and reflecting a willingness by the U.S. to go at it alone that runs counter to much of the rest of Obama's foreign policy. Obama's views on Afghanistan increasingly look like a blind spot and a return to the ways of recent administrations, on a foreign policy that is otherwise forward looking in many regards. There is still time for Obama to get it right, but if he doesn't, Obama will become another American president, like his predecessor, who squandered American power, by stubbornly trying, almost unilaterally, and at great cost, to reach overly ambitious foreign policy goals.