

Published in the North County Times on October 11, 2009

Now that the security situation in Iraq is under control and U.S. forces are beginning to rotate out of the region, America is confronted with a challenge of equal significance in Afghanistan. By all accounts, the combat mission in Afghanistan has reached an important crossroad.

In March, the president unveiled a new approach to achieve victory in this region of the world, reminding all Americans of the necessity to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country." Leading the mission in Afghanistan is Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who was appointed by the president to evaluate the situation on the ground and provide a resource request detailing what he needs to win.

The president now has Gen. McChrystal's request in hand, which includes adding another 40,000 combat troops to the region. As the president considers what course to take, the security situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate. The insurgency is gaining strength, and U.S. soldiers, Marines and our allies are being increasingly targeted by ambushes and roadside bomb attacks. To prevent mission failure and protect those troops already there, the president must act quickly to fulfill Gen. McChrystal's request for more combat resources.

Only recently has the collective commitment to this new strategy has come into question. Some in Congress have raised opposition to any type of troop surge, instead preferring to maintain or draw down combat forces, focus on training local security forces and rely on targeted airstrikes. While a scaled-back strategy might be attractive to some, it would inevitably constrain resources already in short supply, unnecessarily putting our mission and the safety of coalition forces at risk.

Gen. McChrystal has made clear that a small-footprint, counter-insurgency strategy will not work. What's more, Gen. McChrystal has clearly defined our objectives and the metrics for achieving victory against a resurgent enemy. This entails our ground forces working to "stand up" Afghanistan's security and police forces as we did in Iraq, and substantively weaken the stronghold of al-Qaida and the Taliban to the point where these local forces can effectively take control.

Consistent with Gen. McChrystal's recommendation, the initial strategy outlined by the president almost seven months ago constitutes the best way toward accomplishing these goals. My hope is that a favorable decision is reached promptly so our military, Congress and the administration can begin doing their respective parts to provide the full resources to execute an effective counter-insurgency strategy.

Experience also tells us that wars must be run by military leaders, not politicians or bureaucrats. The president rightly recognizes the importance of defeating al-Qaida and the Taliban, but in order to do so, he must stay clear of political currents and do what is right. In this case, it's committing the necessary force level to complete the mission and bring our troops home.

On two occasions during the last few years, I have been to Afghanistan as both a member of Congress and a U.S. Marine. While there, I have served alongside and shared experiences with some of the military men and women who have dutifully undertaken their mission to protect our nation and the people of Afghanistan.

I have also spoken to civilian and military leadership on both sides. They, too, recognize what is at stake.

Our goals in Afghanistan will become further out of reach if we significantly reduce our military presence at such a critical time. Understanding this risk, I hope that President Obama, as commander-in-chief, will follow the recommendation of his appointed military commander and commit his full support to this important mission.