Insight

Foreign Policy 2013: Afghanistan

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January 2013 could see the swearing in of a new president who will inherit a number of foreign policy challenges from the Obama Administration. Over the course of the next few months, this column will take a look at some of these challenges and offer recommendations. We begin with Afghanistan.

Obama's Legacy: Any incoming president will face a number of constraints on his Afghanistan policy due to choices made by President Obama. By January 2013, the 30,000 surge troops Obama ordered will have returned home – sooner than his military advisors recommended – and additional troops may also have been redeployed. 2014 will already be etched in the minds of Americans and Afghans alike as the deadline for ending our combat role and withdrawing our troops. Last week Defense Secretary Panetta even raised the notion of moving the transition up to 2013. In terms of the negotiated settlement the Obama Administration has been seeking with the Taliban, by January 2013, either none will exist because Taliban will have opted simply to wait out the clock, or it will exist as a mere fig leaf to provide cover for the exodus of our troops while the Taliban prepares to retake the country.

Resisting the impulse to deliberate endlessly or blame all our problems on his predecessor as Obama has tended to do, a new president should immediately make his own mark on Afghanistan policy.

A new president needs to be upfront with the American people. During his campaign for president, Obama talked tough about the need to win in Afghanistan. As president, however, he rarely mentions the war. When he does, it is usually in the context of how soon he will bring the troops home. President Obama has made no significant effort to persuade Americans that our continued presence in Afghanistan is worthwhile. Not surprisingly, the public has lost patience with our involvement.

A new president should be more forthright. He'll need to talk bluntly about what is at stake, be honest about the ups and downs, and articulate a clear vision for how we can win.

A new president needs to understand our enemy. We went to war in Afghanistan because al Qaeda had operated freely there. Today al Qaeda is largely gone from Afghanistan and the central organization has been crippled. Yet Afghanistan still matters for our national security, and al Qaeda is only part of the equation.

Vice President Biden caused some head scratching when he recently stated that the Taliban was not our enemy. In fact, the Taliban are our enemy; so are the Haqqani network and any other insurgent groups that try to kill American soldiers. This doesn't mean negotiating with them is necessarily out of the question; as Yitzhak Rabin once said: "One does not make peace with one's friends. One makes peace with one's enemy." Whether a settlement is reached or not, the bottom line is you can't fight a war without knowing your enemy.

A new president needs to articulate a clear goal. Since the 2001 invasion, America's goals for Afghanistan have been inconsistent, and less and less ambitious. Our earliest goals of transforming Afghanistan into a prosperous, flourishing democracy may not be achievable. But the minimalist goal of simply driving out al Qaeda would leave Afghanistan a threat for international security.

Our goal for Afghanistan should be a country that no longer provides safe haven to any terrorist group that seeks to kill Americans. Because a failed state would lead to precisely such an outcome, we must work towards a government that the people of Afghanistan can count on to keep them safe, to provide basic services, and to endorse the Afghan constitution. A thriving democracy is unlikely anytime soon, but a failed state is unacceptable.

A new president needs to change the insurgents' calculus. President Obama's decision to set a timeline for withdrawal while simultaneously trying to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table was self-defeating. The Taliban have no reason to make concessions so long as they believe time is on their side.

A new president may have a small window to change that calculation. A second surge of American troops is not likely to be politically feasible, and the 2014 date has already been set. Still, besides doing everything in our power to stand up a strong Afghan security force, a new president should shift expectations away from any arbitrary timeline. Instead, he should stress a conditions-based withdrawal. He should make it clear that America's interest in Afghanistan won't end in 2014, and we will not tolerate a return to pre-2001 Afghanistan. A new president should immediately negotiate an agreement with the Afghan government to provide our troops a mission and legal immunity beyond 2014. He'll need to be more serious in these negotiations than the Obama Administration was with the Iraqis last year.

A new president needs to prioritize economic assistance. It will be difficult to maintain public support for continued economic assistance to Afghanistan, particularly once our troops have come home. Yet a rapid reduction in aid dollars would lead to instability that the insurgents could exploit. The president will need to connect the dots for Congress and the American people as to how our foreign assistance is helping to keep us safe. Development for development's sake is not enough – a key priority should be improving the long-term

ability of the Afghan government to deliver for the Afghan people so they don't turn to the insurgents.

But foreign donors will not – and should not – bankroll Afghanistan indefinitely. Afghanistan needs to develop an economy that will allow it to function after the foreign assistance has dried up. We therefore also need to use our assistance and influence to help Afghanistan integrate into the global economy.

A new president will need to focus on Afghanistan's 2014 presidential elections. For some reason, the Obama Administration determined to end our combat role the same year Afghanistan is to hold presidential elections. This could be a recipe for disaster.

First of all, another disputed election could throw the country into disarray. The U.S. should work closely with Afghan authorities to ensure that these presidential elections are fairer than the last. It is also essential that President Karzai keep his promise not to run for reelection, which is forbidden under Afghanistan's constitution. Furthermore, a new government offers a chance to address problems that have undermined Afghans' confidence in their current government. While remaining neutral on the candidates themselves, the U.S. should encourage them to take a stand against corruption and cronyism, and help provide the newly elected government with technical assistance to that end.

A new president needs to figure out Pakistan. Pakistan continues to be the lynchpin for security in South Asia. Serious questions remain about Islamabad's loyalties when it comes to fighting terror and being a constructive partner in Afghanistan. A new president will have to find new ways to deal with Pakistan, whether that means a restoration of U.S.-Pakistan ties, or a further cooling of the relationship.

Finally, a new president needs to actually listen to his Generals. And even though h
e has retired from the military, it wouldn't hurt to get David Petraeus' input either.