

Troop deployment is no substitute for strategy

by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Deployment of 17,000 more U.S. combat troops to Afghanistan is "necessary to stabilize a deteriorating situation," President Barack Obama said last week.

If it works, it would be a first.

Afghanistan is not now, and never has been, a stable country — at least not as the word is understood in most of the world. Nor will it be stabilized by the presence of 17,000 more foreign troops.

The real challenge for the Obama administration, and the nation, isn't finding more troops to send to Afghanistan. It's finding a coherent strategy to guide American interests in the years to come.

The war began with a specific threat and a specific target: Osama bin Laden and the Taliban government that harbored al-Qaida. But bin Laden escaped as U.S. and Afghan forces closed in. He fled, presumably into mountainous western Pakistan.

In the years since, as American focus turned to Iraq, Afghanistan slowly has slipped under the thumb of a motley array of warlords, religious fundamentalists and narco-terrorists.

America and its NATO allies are proud, and justly so, of having brought democracy to Afghanistan, of building schools and training police. But those successes remain fragile.

The government of Hamid Karzai has little power in the countryside and is widely viewed as corrupt. Schools have been burned and policemen killed by the newly resurgent Taliban, which still operates from sanctuaries just across the border in Pakistan.

The civilian death toll in Afghanistan jumped 40 percent last year, according to the United Nations. Most of those deaths were caused by the Taliban.

But American air strikes aimed at rebel leaders also have killed civilians, and their deaths have weakened support for NATO, even from the Karzai government.

Newly deployed U.S. forces are expected to be stationed in southern provinces along the Pakistan border. Like NATO forces already assigned there, they won't be able to follow Taliban fighters back across the border, and they won't be able to stamp out the drug trade on which many Afghans " friend and foe alike " depend for their livelihoods.

The Obama administration still is debating what to do about Afghanistan in the long term. The counterinsurgency tactics that helped quell the Sunni uprising in Iraq would be far more problematic with warlords and the Taliban. A review of U.S. policy isn't expected to be complete until sometime in April.

Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, already has indicated that the total number of U.S. troops headed to Afghanistan in the next year may reach 30,000. Afghanistan could swallow them without a second thought; at the height of its military involvement there, the Soviet Union controlled 400,000 troops in the country. Still, the Soviets were forced to withdraw in 1988.

There is no purely military solution to the problem. Nor does the answer lie in promoting democracy, women's rights or other Western concepts that have little currency in a country where tribal loyalties supersede national identity.

Success " however it is defined " probably will come only with help from Pakistan, Russia and China. The best, and only hope, is to create a semblance of stability, and hope that the Afghan people decide they like it.

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