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President's real 'Waterloo': an unstable Afghanistan

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SHOULD President Barack Obama send additional troops to Afghanistan? He's certainly receiving plenty of advice in Washington and in the media, particularly on the editorial pages of major American and European newspapers.

The president is between the proverbial "rock and a hard place." He can send more troops to prevent defeat and, perhaps, achieve modest success, or withdraw and face charges of defeatism and likely new terrorist attacks.

Remember we went to Afghanistan in response to the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States perpetrated by Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida organization that was based in Afghanistan and given protection by the Taliban.

By December 2001, U.S. and Afghan opposition forces ousted the Taliban and immobilized al-Qaida. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001. They came to power during the country's long civil war. Their policies, including their treatment of women and support of terrorists, ostracized them from the world community. The Taliban are one of the mujahedeen ("holy warriors" or "freedom fighters") that formed during the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989.

Since being defeated in 2001, the Taliban, who are primarily Pashtuns, the largest tribal group in Afghanistan, regrouped in 2004 and have mounted a strong insurgency movement at the local level to oppose the government in Kabul headed by President Hamid Karzai as well as U.S. and other foreign troops remaining in their country. Many of their leaders were educated in neighboring Pakistan and received valuable training and supplies from Pakistani sources. Most Pashtuns live along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in the mountainous areas of both countries where Osama bin Laden is thought to be hiding. In fact, there are several million Pashtuns who live in both countries along the border.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate Obama vigorously opposed the war in Iraq, but referred to our continued military involvement in Afghanistan as a necessary war. The country, almost the size of Texas, has historically been important in the Eurasian heartland. In ancient times, it lay on the main caravan route between Europe and India. Many peoples, including Persians, Greeks, Mongols, British and Russians struggled through the years to control this land as the gateway to the riches of India.

Most attempts to control Afghanistan have failed. Its mountains, known as the Hindu Kush, reach heights of 25,000 feet along the Pakistan border and are virtually impregnable. They gradually descend to a rolling plain in the southwest. Most of the people live in the valleys of the Hindu Kush and are tough, independent tribesmen who follow many of the customs of their ancestors. Most are farmers who raise crops in the mountain valleys, including some who grow poppy plants containing opium which supplies 90 percent of the world's heroin. Thus, the country is rife with warlords, militants and drug smugglers.

However, south of Kabul, where the mountains descend, are some of the world's last untapped deposits of copper, iron, gold, uranium and precious gems. According to Robert D. Kaplan, the well-known analyst of

international affairs, China already has its eyes on these metal and mineral reserves and has invested “tens of billions of dollars” to exploit them. This can be good for the Afghan economy and be a point of convergence between the U.S. and China in seeking a more stable Afghanistan. Having visited the region twice in the past year, I would observe that Russia is concerned about continuing unrest in the Islamic southern tier of the former Soviet Union, and has an interest in American efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

Obama has in hand an extensive report from Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, his commander on the ground in Afghanistan, which makes a strong case for more resources both to fight the Taliban and convince Afghans that the outside world will stay the course. McChrystal seeks 40,000 more troops to add to the 68,000 already there. He also seeks resources to step up our counter-insurgency program to improve the lives of Afghan villagers. The biggest fear expressed in the report is that al-Qaida would gain a strengthened haven there if the Taliban is returned to power.

Obama has been accused of vacillating regarding a decision since receiving the McChrystal report in August. Now that a runoff election for president has been set for Saturday, he has cover until then. He knows that the prospect of long, protracted struggle resulting in a quagmire much like Vietnam would have the power to break his presidency. However, without our increased involvement, a destabilized Afghanistan would adversely affect Pakistan and the entire region and could be the beginning of a catastrophe.

Life as the foremost superpower in the world is not easy, but preferable to the alternatives, given the realities of our times.

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