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Doubts mount on Afghan surge

Rowan Scarborough (Contact)

While U.S. commanders and both presidential candidates are pressing the Pentagon to send more troops to Afghanistan, several military and Afghanistan analysts say a surge there will not solve and could even worsen the problems of a country famous for resisting foreign interference.

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell told reporters recently that commanders in Afghanistan want an additional three combat brigades, or about 10,000 troops.

But given U.S. commitments in Iraq, he said, a decision on an increase of that size - nearly a 30 percent boost - would be left to the next administration in early 2009.

More forces are being pushed as politicians ask what went wrong in a campaign that ousted the Taliban in two months in late 2001 using a few hundred commandos, CIA operatives and waves of air strikes. More than six years later, violence is up and a resurgent Taliban seems to have a limitless supply of suicidal fighters.

A confident Gen. James Jones came to the Pentagon pressroom in March 2006 to express optimism about the war in Afghanistan.

"My take on the situation in Afghanistan is that the Taliban and al Qaeda are not in a position where they can restart an insurgency of any size and major scope," said Gen. Jones, who was the NATO commander.

The United States had 23,000 troops in Afghanistan on that day.

The Pentagon had talked about reducing troops in the war's first few years. But today, more than 30,000 U.S. service members are fighting in the one-time Taliban stronghold, fighting alongside another 22,000 troops from NATO allies. A major project at the Defense Department is to scour Army and Marine units to determine whether any can be freed up and sent to Afghanistan.

Afghanistan specialists say more U.S. combat forces are not the answer for the medium and long term.

Barnett Rubin, a director of studies at the Center for International Cooperation at New York University, called a troop surge in Afghanistan "a stopgap measure" that is unlikely to work without addressing the issue of Taliban recruitment in Pakistan and the failure of the Afghan government to provide security and development.

"Unless you can address Pakistan and governance in Afghanistan, more troops won't help," Mr. Rubin said.

The Taliban and its allies have come close to assassinating President Hamid

Karzai. They recently bombed the Indian Embassy in Kabul and have retaken villages and towns in the south.

To underscore their newfound prowess, the Taliban staged a sophisticated attack on a U.S. temporary base in Wanat in the south, killing nine U.S. service members. Afterward, U.S. commanders ordered the post abandoned.

Adm. Michael G. Mullen, Joint Chiefs chairman, says there are too few U.S. and European troops to hold ground that is captured. But his moves are limited until President Bush lowers force levels in Iraq from the current 146,000 troops.

Why did the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorate?

The No. 1 reason cited by Pentagon officials and military specialists is the vast tribal region of Pakistan - a generally ungoverned expanse of 3 million people where the ousted Taliban and al Qaeda operatives are relatively free to recruit, train and infiltrate neighboring Afghanistan.

"We're seeing a greater number of insurgents and foreign fighters flowing across the border with Pakistan, unmolested and unhindered," an exasperated Adm. Mullen told reporters recently. "This movement needs to stop."

He added, "I talked with all our leaders there, and they all indicated that, you know, they need more troops."

However, two veterans of the Afghanistan war said more conventional forces are part of the problem.

An Army Green Beret who spent time in Afghanistan training Afghans said too many conventional forces already are being sent there.

"The war in Afghanistan is irregular warfare," said the officer, who asked not to be named because he is not authorized to speak to the press. "This requires unconventional forces. As soon as conventional forces greatly outnumber Special Forces in theater, resources are diverted to conventional forces that have the greater need per capita."

A former senior commander in Afghanistan said U.S. policy went wrong when it veered away from the original plan of using special operations forces, CIA operatives and economic aid to empower anti-Taliban Afghans to fight the enemy themselves.

"They are the ones who know where they are coming over from Pakistan," said the former commander, who asked not to be named because he now works for a U.S. defense firm that does business in the Middle East.

He said that before the October 2001 invasion, U.S. Central Command conducted a study of why foreign invaders failed in Afghanistan. The answer: They poured in too many troops, creating ample targets for hit-and-run insurgents.

"If I were doing it, I would go back to the way we were doing it originally," the former commander said. "I think we have way too many troops."

Pentagon officials declined to comment about the long-term risks of increasing the

foreign military presence in Afghanistan. "We feel this is best asked of and answered by the democratically elected government of Afghanistan," said Maj. Stewart Upton, a Pentagon spokesman.

The total foreign troop commitment in Afghanistan has gone from several hundred at the war's start to 10,000 in 2003 to 52,000 today, more than half of them American.

Critics of the Iraq war and the Bush administration's handling of the war on terrorism also caution that a long-term troop surge in Afghanistan could backfire.

Richard Holbrooke, a top State Department official and ambassador to the United Nations under President Clinton, said he supported an infusion of troops into southern and eastern Afghanistan to deal with the immediate Taliban threat.

"But I would not like to see us take over this war," Mr. Holbrooke said, because it would retard the development of Afghanistan's own security forces and spark a hostile reaction among ordinary Afghans.

"We run the real risk of triggering a xenophobic reaction from a people that has resisted outside forces dating back to Alexander the Great."

cDavid R. Sands and Barbara Slavin contributed to this article.