

New commander for same Afghan force

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U.S. President Barack Obama appointed Major General Stanley McCrystal as the new commander of American and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in Afghanistan.

General McCrystal was nominated for the position by Defense Secretary Robert Gates; he previously served as the commander of United States Special Operations (SOCOM).

The commander replacement, according to the White House, does not indicate that the President no longer has confidence in the former ISAF Commander David McKiernan. Secretary Gates said that now is the best time to make changes. The operation in Afghanistan requires new thinking and a new approach by the military command. He believes that the decision to replace the commander in Afghanistan corresponds to the best national security interests of the United States. The new commander should match the new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, Secretary Gates added.

Experts believe, however, that the change in command does not only reflect the recent developments in Afghanistan. The former Commander David McKiernan was a good specialist in fighting terrorists. He was appointed in January last year by former President George Bush, who supported the General's idea to increase the strength of the U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

General McKiernan succeeded in increasing the number of U.S. troops almost twofold – from 25,000 to 40,000, but failed to achieve a breakthrough in the war against Taliban. The General requested additional 10,000 troops, but the request was refused by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who simultaneously had to deal with rebels in Iraq. Secretary Gates did not share the General's approach to securing a victory in Afghanistan through significantly increasing the U.S. troops in the country. According to Secretary Gates, other means are necessary.

Some of these new measures may include bigger reliance on Afghan troops; close cooperation with ISAF forces, comprising 32,000 NATO troops; precision strikes on the rebels' bases and camps to avoid civilian casualties. The latter not only cause protests, indignation and resentment against Americans, but also result in new recruits joining the Taliban forces.

A new strategy in Afghanistan was also announced by President Obama. According to the U.S. President, the new strategy provides for transferring some of the troops from Iraq to Afghanistan, more actively attracting additional NATO forces and troops from other allied nations for peace building operations in Afghanistan.

Most importantly, it is necessary to provide economic development assistance to Afghanistan, build an alternative to drugs trafficking by creating new jobs, prevent the growth of Taliban influence, and ensure that the elections to be held this year are free and fair. In addition, it is essential to secure not only Kabul's, but also Islamabad's support in the fight against Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

President Obama announced this plan after meeting with Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari, the Presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively. Mr Obama said that Washington will definitely cooperate with Afghan and international partners, to avoid civilian casualties. U.S. will provide assistance for the Pakistani leadership, to support democratic institutions in the fight against the rebels, who represent a serious threat to the country. President Obama said that he had asked the Congress to provide funds for Pakistan to build schools, hospitals, and roads.

Under pressure from Washington, Pakistan did launch a campaign against Taliban in the Swat river basin in the country's north-west. The Pakistani troops subjected the Taliban positions to severe bombardment from howitzers and mortars and bombed them from helicopters. The rebels, however, offered severe resistance and did not retreat from their positions, news agencies reported. They remain in control of 90 percent of the region's territory and patrol residential areas.

Simultaneously, a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle launched a missile attack against a district in South Waziristan, which is a part of the tribal zone, where Al-Qaeda leaders could be hiding, according to the U.S. command. There were no reports on the consequences of the strike. Prior to the latest attack, the U.S. UAVs launched about thirty strikes against the district causing numerous civilian casualties. Nevertheless, the tribal zone continues to remain off-limits both for ISAF forces and the U.S. troops. The territory is still inaccessible even for cargo transit, so important for ISAF.

It remains to be seen whether the new commander Major General Stanley McCrystal will be able to resolve this problem. In Washington as well as in NATO headquarters in Brussels, there is an understanding that it is impossible to win the fight against terrorism, Taliban, and Al-Qaeda by military means alone. Therefore, President Barack Obama has called for increased economic assistance to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

These calls, in various interpretations, are voiced during every NATO summit on fight against international terrorism. Specifically, they were made at the November 2006 NATO summit in Riga. During the summit, many countries promised to allocate funds for social and economic development of the Asian countries, suffering from religious extremism. Unfortunately, the promises never turned into actions, just as the promises of the European nations to provide more troops for ISAF never became a reality. NATO leaders even had to ask Kazakhstan to provide troops for the peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan, a member-state of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, has yet to officially respond to this request. It is obvious however, that NATO and the U.S. face a prolonged and not necessarily a victorious campaign against Taliban and Al-Qaeda. A commander replacement as well as a new strategy can hardly change anything.

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