

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, December 7, 2011 5:48 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: WSJ - U.S. General Seeks Pause in Afghan Pullout

Interesting

From: Nuland, Victoria J
Sent: Wednesday, December 07, 2011 02:41 AM
To: Sullivan, Jacob J
Subject: Fw: WSJ - U.S. General Seeks Pause in Afghan Pullout

Here we go - let the relitigating begin!

From: Edwards, Harry G (PACE) [mailto:EdwardsHg@state.gov]
Sent: Tuesday, December 06, 2011 09:10 PM
To: PA-Monitoring-Group-DL; SCA-Press
Subject: WSJ - U.S. General Seeks Pause in Afghan Pullout

U.S. General Seeks Pause in Afghan Pullout
DECEMBER 6, 2011, 8:19 P.M. ET..
Wall Street Journal
By ADAM ENTOUS And JULIAN E. BARNES

WASHINGTON—The top military commander in Afghanistan is privately recommending staving off new U.S. troop reductions until 2014, a position that could put him at odds with a White House eager to wind down the 10-year-old war.

Gen. John Allen, who commands U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces in Afghanistan, has shared his thinking with visiting congressional officials and other delegations in a series of recent closed-door briefings in Kabul, according to participants and other officials.

In June, President Barack Obama ordered the Pentagon to wind down a 33,000 troop surge by reducing the U.S. force to about 68,000 by the end of next summer. There currently are around 97,000 U.S. troops in the war zone and the number is gradually dropping, under that pullout plan.

After the 2012 drawdown is complete, Mr. Obama said U.S. troops would continue leaving Afghanistan at a "steady pace" as Afghan forces assume more responsibility for the country's security.

But people briefed on Gen. Allen's thinking said he wants to halt troop withdrawals after the 2012 reductions and maintain troop levels at 68,000 through all of 2013. He envisages the drawdown resuming sometime in 2014, the year Afghans are scheduled to assume lead responsibility for securing the country, officials said.

This position reflects the findings of an internal assessment by NATO's International Security Assistance Force, which Gen. Allen commands.

The assessment, officials said, warns that quickly cutting U.S. troop levels below 68,000 would make it harder to clear and hold insurgent havens, and would complicate efforts to protect supply lines and bases ahead of the scheduled 2014 handover.

"It is about preserving capabilities until the end," a senior defense official said of Gen. Allen's reasoning. Gen. Allen officially took command of the war in July.

In contrast, some civilian advisers to the White House have privately made clear they want troop reductions in 2013 to match or exceed the 23,000 scheduled to be withdrawn between the beginning of 2012 and the end of the summer, said participants in the White House discussions. The Pentagon is slated to pull out 10,000 troops by the end of this year.

Military commanders in the field frequently use briefings for high-level visitors both to try to advance their agenda and to sound out political leaders on military plans. Some officials in Washington are critical of what they sometimes see as commanders in war zones circumventing decision makers back home.

Preliminary discussions are just now beginning within the military and the administration about withdrawals beyond those already planned.

"There have been no decisions made about the troop presence in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the surge troops, therefore it is premature to be speculating beyond what we've already planned for," Pentagon spokesman Capt. John Kirby said.

Another significant troop reduction announcement could allow Mr. Obama to spotlight his commitment to ending the war.

However, it could also open him to charges that he doesn't heed the advice of top commanders in the field, especially if disagreements flare between the White House and military commanders over the next steps in the war.

While eager to show he is winding down the war, Mr. Obama is likely to be wary of a public scrape with top military commanders, which could provide fodder for unified Republican attacks.

Mr. Obama has been criticized by Republican presidential hopefuls for his handling of U.S. foreign policy, which his own supporters see as a strong suit. The GOP hopefuls are divided over what to do in Afghanistan, with some advocating a rapid withdrawal and others urging a more sustained effort.

Troop decisions have long been a flashpoint in relations between the Obama White House and the military. Tensions flared in 2009 over the scale of an Afghan troop surge and again this year over keeping U.S. forces in Iraq. Mr. Obama has had four top commanders in Afghanistan, two of which he forced from their posts.

A senior military official said there was a "natural tension" between commanders who want to maintain high troop levels and White House officials who are under domestic political pressure to reduce the U.S. footprint.

Administration officials said Mr. Obama carefully considers the recommendations of military commanders, as well as civilian advisers, in decisions on strategy and troop levels.

Some advisers to Mr. Obama would like to see further Afghan troop reductions next year, according to several officials, possibly to coincide with a summit of NATO leaders in Chicago in May, at the height of the U.S. presidential campaign.

Presentations by Gen. Allen and other top officers in Kabul about the importance of maintaining troop levels at 68,000 have raised some eyebrows on Capitol Hill, where many Democratic lawmakers favor a more rapid withdrawal.

"We don't have the resources, the manpower or time to do everything that they want to do," said Rep. Mike Quigley, an Illinois Democrat who recently visited Kabul, where he met with top commanders.

"Yes, we want to get out of there," said Rep. Rob Wittman, a Virginia Republican who took part in the same trip. But Rep. Wittman said his constituents agreed with commanders in the field and wanted to make sure "we're not withdrawing troops at a rate that compromises the gains that we've made."

Rep. Wittman said that requires "thoughtful, calculated, military decisions about our withdrawal."

Both lawmakers declined to say what Gen. Allen told them during their meetings in Kabul about future troop levels.

Defense officials say Gen. Allen has yet to present a formal recommendation to the Pentagon or the White House, but confirmed his preference for maintaining the 68,000 level.

A military official said Gen. Allen, in recent briefings with lawmakers and others, has not used specific numbers, speaking only about his preference to stay at presurge troop levels.

The military official said Gen. Allen, in recent briefings with lawmakers and others, was "trying to simply provide his best military advice" while showing respect for White House control over war strategy and troop commitments.

Officials briefed on U.S. and NATO planning say ISAF war planners have done extensive study on the force level requirements in the country. A leading rationale for maintaining U.S. troop levels is concern that NATO allies plan major withdrawals in 2012 and beyond.

According to the internal assessment prepared by ISAF, cutting U.S. troop levels below 68,000 could make it harder to ensure the safety of U.S. and allied forces in more remote regions.

Gen. Allen and other ISAF officers have also privately cautioned that future reductions could create a series of logistical problems that could jeopardize supply lines for U.S., NATO and Afghan forces. It also would make it harder to maintain rapid-response capabilities that now allow the military to evacuate wounded soldiers to combat hospitals within an hour of their injuries.

ISAF officials also worry that additional troop reductions before 2014 could jeopardize NATO's offensive in eastern Afghanistan, which is due to expand next summer. Gen. Allen is concerned that territorial gains will be harder to defend in 2013 if troop levels drop below 68,000.

The Pentagon is considering the possibility of shifting U.S. strategy in Afghanistan starting as early as next year, giving Afghanistan greater responsibility and limiting allied forces to a "train, advise and assist" mission.

Some officials who want to keep troop levels at 68,000 through 2013 argue that such a mission change, coming in the middle of the presidential campaign, could provide some political cover to the White House to delay sharp troop reductions into 2014.

It is unclear whether Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, agree with Gen. Allen's position. During a visit to Afghanistan in July, Mr. Panetta appeared to back a gradual withdrawal, telling reporters: "We're going to have 70,000 there through 2014, and obviously, as we get to 2014, we'll develop a plan as to how we reduce that force at that time."

Pentagon officials said at the time that Mr. Panetta misspoke and that drawdown plans through 2014 had yet to be developed.

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