

Washington, D.C. - After returning from a mid-November trip to Afghanistan, where he met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, members of the Afghan Parliament and Gens. McChrystal and Eikenbury, Congressman David Price (NC-04) penned the following column for the Charlotte Observer. Published today, the column outlines four major challenges the United States faces as it moves forward in Afghanistan.

The Congressman led the trip, which also made stops in Pakistan and Lebanon, in his capacity as Chairman of the House Democracy Partnership, which partners with legislatures in developing democracies on institutional development projects. The Congressman's column is below:

Charlotte Observer – Focusing on troop levels obscures the wider issues: In Pakistan and Afghanistan, U.S. must think long-term.

By Rep. David Price

December 1, 2009

As President Barack Obama prepares to unveil his revised strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, I - like many Americans - have been reflecting on the future of our country's involvement in the two countries. I recently led a bipartisan delegation to Islamabad and Kabul as chairman of the House Democracy Partnership, and returned with four observations that should help guide the coming decisions facing Congress.

First, Afghanistan's future is tied inextricably to Pakistan's - and vice-versa. The administration has wisely made this a guiding principle of its strategic review, but public debate has focused on Afghanistan, without considering how instability on either side of the border feeds instability on the other. The Pakistani military has waged a largely successful campaign against the so-called "Pakistani Taliban," but it has yet to take on the "Afghan Taliban" responsible for plotting the cross-border insurgency. Should it do so, the U.S.-NATO effort in Afghanistan would be significantly enhanced. Should it fail to do so, or should political instability undermine its progress, then coalition forces will continue to face steep odds in their attempt to secure

southern and eastern Afghanistan - which in turn bodes ill for Pakistan's stability.

Second, the underlying challenges facing the two countries are fundamentally nonmilitary in nature. This also has become somewhat of a truism among senior policymakers, including Gen. Stanley McChrystal, but you wouldn't know it from the public debate, which has focused myopically on troop levels. This narrow focus misconstrues the real nature of the problem and sends the wrong signals to our allies in Kabul and Islamabad about our long-term commitment.

Third, leaders in both countries worry the U.S. will abandon them once it has achieved its short-term objectives. This reduces their willingness to buy into our long-term strategy. The ghosts of the early 1990s - when U.S. interest in Afghanistan waned after the Soviet withdrawal - loom large in Kabul, while the U.S.-Pakistani relationship has always been one of fits and starts. Our fixation over troop levels only reinforces fears that history will repeat itself. Instead, we should be discussing a transfer of security responsibilities within the broader context of an enduring commitment that will long outlast the last American boots on the ground.

Fourth, the basis of this long-term commitment should be support for strong institutions, not strong individuals. The Bush administration's unwavering support for former President Pervez Musharraf still resonates bitterly among many Pakistanis, while many Afghans perceive us to be casting our lot with President Hamid Karzai at the expense of other institutions. In the near term, Karzai's ability to follow words with actions will be critical. But in the long run, stability lies in helping Afghanistan and Pakistan build independent and effective institutions that don't depend on the individuals at their helm. One place to start would be with their national legislatures, which include sizable numbers of credible leaders ready to assume greater responsibility.

I returned from Pakistan and Afghanistan struck by the gravity of the moment and the profound importance of getting things right before it is too late. Obama has been wise to take the time to consult widely and weigh the consequences of his decision. Congress owes it to the country to give his proposal the same level of scrutiny and reasoned debate.

While much of our focus will be on troop levels, we must remember that peace and security depend ultimately on effective governance, political reconciliation, social and economic development and regional cooperation. The continued presence of U.S. forces makes sense only to the degree it serves these larger objectives.

U.S. Rep. David Price chairs the House Democracy Partnership, a commission working to strengthen democratic institutions in 14 countries, including Afghanistan.

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