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President-elect Barack Obama, in his bid to refurbish American leadership in the world, is determined to project the image that his administration, from “day one,” will be hard at work. Unfortunately, for the first several months, his ability to be seen as successful will depend less on his own efforts and much more on what others choose to do—or not to do. Indeed, Iraqis, Germans and Pakistanis will have as much influence on whether Obama is seen as making progress in foreign policy as his own cabinet and staff—especially because it seems the new president is choosing Afghanistan as the place where he will make his stand.

Everyone recognizes that disengagement from Iraq will be the hallmark of Obama’s agenda of change, including his oft-stated assessment that the Bush administration, by going into Iraq in the first place, dropped the ball on Afghanistan. More prosaically, he and his team will not be able to direct their focus to other pressing issues as long as Iraq continues to command center stage in consuming American resources and attention. Yet, Obama’s ability to begin troop withdrawals from Iraq—which is a necessity if he plans to switch the focus of the war on terror back to Afghanistan—is conditioned on whether Iraqis are prepared to take greater responsibility for building on the momentary peace and quiet that events of the last year have provided. This is why I do not believe the bombings that took place in Baghdad after the election were entirely coincidental—they should have sent a clear signal that American disengagement from Iraq is still driven by what Iraqis do. It doesn’t seem as if a president Obama would be willing to make, at least not yet, the argument that it would be the fault of Iraqis alone if the country were to see a resumption of violence and instability.

And left simmering on the agenda is the still unresolved status of the city of Kirkuk—and with it, the related questions about Iraqi federalism and the divide between Arabs and Kurds. The standoff that occurred recently in the city of Khanaqin—where Iraqi security forces faced off against regional Kurdish soldiers—is an unpleasant harbinger of what might be in store if Kurds and the central Iraqi government cannot reach some workable compromise over the status of the disputed territories. A Kurdish-Arab civil war would make it nigh impossible for the United States to withdraw forces from Iraq.

Moving to Afghanistan. Not only does the new administration want to put more focus on fighting the conflict there, but they want to draw in more support from our European allies. This is seen as essential on two fronts—first, to put more boots on the ground in Afghanistan itself, and second, to demonstrate that the Obama administration will have more success in convincing our friends and partners across the Atlantic to support U.S. efforts. But the news from Europe is not entirely encouraging. Germany, in particular, goes to the polls in 2009—and it is hard to see how politicians win votes by promising to send more troops to a combat zone. Joerg Wolf, the editor of the Atlantic Community, rhetorically asks:

"I wonder how surprised, disappointed or even angry [Democrats] will be when President Obama fails to rally the Europeans around the U.S. led mission NATO mission in Afghanistan. I think the German refusal to send combat troops to southern Afghanistan is not entirely based on the Bush administration's foreign policies. Despite his enormous charisma and intellect, President Obama will not be able to convince Germans to agree to send their sons and daughters to a very dangerous mission far far away from home."

Marek Swierczynski, a leading Polish journalist, is somewhat more sanguine, arguing that under "new conditions" Europeans might be prepared to increase the number of troops and civilian specialists, but nonetheless warns, "Obama, Europe and NATO should do whatever they can not to get caught in a 'cul de sac' of Afghanistan."

If Obama cannot pull sufficient forces from Iraq to move them to Afghanistan, and the Europeans offer only token support, then what? The third wild card is Pakistan. How far will Islamabad go in offering support? Retired Pakistani Air Marshal Ayaz A. Khan wrote in Sunday's Pakistan Observer about ongoing cooperation between Washington and Islamabad in fighting extremists who destabilize both Afghanistan and Pakistan. He noted, "What's different on the Pakistani side isn't just the secret cooperation with America. There was lots of that under the previous president, Pervez Musharraf. What's new is that [President] Zardari and [Chief of the General Staff] Kiyani are working openly to build popular support for their operations against the Muslim militants." It's a hopeful sign, but there are limits to how far any Pakistani administration—especially a democratically-elected one—can support the U.S. agenda. And the critical tradeoff may be for the United States to curtail or suspend altogether Predator drone attacks that cross into Pakistani territory.

The Obama administration will want to demonstrate some foreign-policy successes in its first months after taking office. But the initiative lies in the hands of others—and getting them to act in ways that benefit Washington may prove to be a challenge even for the new president.

A Little Help From Our Friends

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