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Analysts Expect Long-Term, Costly U.S. Campaign in Afghanistan

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As the Obama administration expands U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, military experts are warning that the United States is taking on security and political commitments that will last at least a decade and a cost that will probably eclipse that of the Iraq war.

Since the invasion of Afghanistan eight years ago, the United States has spent \$223 billion on war-related funding for that country, according to the Congressional Research Service. Aid expenditures, excluding the cost of combat operations, have grown exponentially, from \$982 million in 2003 to \$9.3 billion last year.

The costs are almost certain to keep growing. The Obama administration is in the process of overhauling the U.S. approach to Afghanistan, putting its focus on long-term security, economic sustainability and development. That approach is also likely to require deployment of more American military personnel, at the very least to train additional Afghan security forces.

Later this month, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, is expected to present his analysis of the situation in the country. The analysis could prompt an increase in U.S. troop levels to help implement President Obama's new strategy.

Military experts insist that the additional resources are necessary. But many, including some advising McChrystal, say they fear the public has not been made aware of the significant commitments that come with Washington's new policies.

"We will need a large combat presence for many years to come, and we will probably need a large financial commitment longer than that," said Stephen Biddle, a senior fellow for defense policy at the Council on Foreign Relations and a member of the "strategic assessment" team advising McChrystal. The expansion of the Afghan security force that the general will recommend to secure the country "will inevitably cost much more than any imaginable Afghan government is going to be able to afford on its own," Biddle added.

"Afghan forces will need \$4 billion a year for another decade, with a like sum for development," said Bing West, a former assistant secretary of defense and combat Marine who has chronicled the Iraq and Afghan wars. Bing said the danger is that Congress is "so generous in support of our own forces today, it may not support the aid needed for progress in Afghanistan tomorrow."

Some members of Congress are worried. The House Appropriations Committee said in its report on the fiscal 2010 defense appropriations bill that its members are "concerned about the prospects for an open-ended U.S. commitment to bring stability to a country that has a decades-long history of successfully rebuffing foreign military intervention and attempts to influence internal politics."

The Afghan government has made some political and military progress since 2001, but the Taliban insurgency has been reinvigorated.

Anthony H. Cordesman, another member of McChrystal's advisory group and a national security expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told reporters recently that even with military gains in the next 12 to 18 months, it would take years to reduce sharply the threat from the Taliban and other insurgent forces.

The task that the United States has taken on in Afghanistan is in many ways more difficult than the one it has encountered in Iraq, where the U.S. government has spent \$684 billion in war-related funding.

In a 2008 study that ranked the weakest states in the developing world, the Brookings Institution rated Afghanistan second only to Somalia. Afghanistan's gross domestic product in 2008 was \$23 billion, with about \$3 billion coming from opium production, according to the CIA's World Factbook. Oil-producing Iraq had a GDP of \$113 billion.

Afghanistan's central government takes in roughly \$890 million in annual revenue, according to the World Factbook. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has pointed out that Afghanistan's national budget cannot support the \$2 billion needed today for the country's army and police force.

Dutch Army Brig. Gen. Tom Middendorp, commander of the coalition task force in Afghanistan's southern Uruzgan province, described the region as virtually prehistoric.

"It's the poorest province of one of the poorest countries in the world. And if you walk through that province, it's like walking through the Old Testament," Middendorp told reporters recently. "There is enormous illiteracy in the province. More than 90 percent cannot write or read. So it's very basic, what you do there. And they have had 30 years of conflict."

Unlike in Iraq, where Obama has established a timeline for U.S. involvement, the president has not said when he would like to see troops withdrawn from Afghanistan.

White House officials emphasize that the burden is not that of the United States alone. The NATO-led force in the country has 61,000 troops from 42 countries; about 29,000 of those troops are American.

Still, military experts say the United States will not be able to shed its commitment easily.

The government has issued billions of dollars in contracts in recent years, underscoring the vast extent of work that U.S. officials are commissioning.

Among other purposes, contractors have been sought this summer to build a \$25 million provincial Afghan National Police headquarters; maintain anti-personnel mine systems; design and build

multimillion-dollar sections of roads; deliver by sea and air billions of dollars worth of military bulk cargo; and supervise a drug-eradication program.

One solicitation, issued by the Army Corps of Engineers, is aimed at finding a contractor to bring together Afghan economic, social, legal and political groups to help build the country's infrastructure. The contractor would work with Afghan government officials as well as representatives from private and nongovernmental organizations to establish a way to allocate resources for new projects.

"We are looking at two decades of supplying a few billion a year to Afghanistan," said Michael E. O'Hanlon, a senior fellow and military expert at the Brookings Institution, adding: "It's a reasonable guess that for 20 years, we essentially will have to fund half the Afghan budget." He described the price as reasonable, given that it may cost the United States \$100 billion this year to continue fighting.

"We are creating a [long-term military aid] situation similar to the ones we have with Israel, Egypt and Jordan," he said.

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