

Scowcroft lauds Obama's foreign diplomacy

By Eli Lake
Tuesday, October 6, 2009

Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to two Republican presidents, gave President Obama high marks for his foreign policy of engagement but warned that a retreat from Afghanistan would have consequences for neighboring Pakistan that could be "catastrophic for the United States."

Mr. Scowcroft told reporters and editors of The Washington Times on Monday that Mr. Obama had succeeded in changing the tone of America's relationship with the world compared with the George W. Bush administration.

"Now comes the difficult part, which is crafting policy," Mr. Scowcroft said.

On Afghanistan, Mr. Scowcroft warned the president against "strategic drift" away from the primary U.S. mission of counterterrorism. He said Mr. Obama's choice of Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal to lead U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan implied a commitment to defeating the Taliban insurgency as the best way of preventing terrorist attacks on the United States.

Mr. Obama is weighing Gen. McChrystal's request for more troops amid what appear to be serious divisions within the administration. Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. is said to be advocating a smaller U.S. footprint.

Press Secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters on Monday that Mr. Obama may take weeks to decide whether to add troops, but said the idea of pulling out isn't on the table. "I don't think we have the option to leave. That's quite clear," Mr. Gibbs said, as reported by the Associated Press.

Gen. McChrystal, in a speech last week in London, warned that a failure to leave behind a stable Afghanistan would jeopardize the counterterrorism campaign.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates on Monday told an Army conference that Mr. Obama needs time and space to make strategic decisions about the war, AP reported.

Later Monday, Mr. Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, speaking to CNN during a joint interview, said the goal for the war continues to be disrupting al Qaeda and preventing it from threatening the United States again, but they also said a reassessment of the means to do that is appropriate. Mrs. Clinton said a "snap decision" about the next step would be counterproductive, according to AP. The interview will air Tuesday. In his interview with The Times, Mr. Scowcroft expressed concern about a general advocating his point of view publicly while administration deliberations continue.

"I have been surprised because I think his job is to be frank and honest, but in his chain of command up to the commander in chief," Mr. Scowcroft said. "If his goal is to box his commander in chief in, that's not good. I don't know that is his goal, I have met him and been impressed with him, but it's a bit unusual," he said.

Nevertheless, Mr. Scowcroft said he was worried about the consequences of U.S. policy in Afghanistan on neighboring Pakistan, which has nuclear weapons. Noting the fragility of Pakistan, which is facing its own Islamic extremist threat, he said a U.S. withdrawal would be much graver for South Asia than the U.S. retreat from Vietnam was for Southeast Asia in the 1970s.

"The reason for Vietnam was the fear of a communist surge through Southeast Asia," he said. "That didn't happen. I think the consequences for Pakistan [of a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan] could be catastrophic for the United States because that is a very intense and complex region."

Mr. Scowcroft, national security adviser to Presidents Ford and George H.W. Bush, said he keeps in touch with James L. Jones, the current national security adviser, as well as Mr. Gates.

Mr. Scowcroft praised the Obama administration's diplomatic engagement with Iran and said a meeting with Iran in Geneva last week that ended with some tentative Iranian compromises on the country's nuclear program was "as good as these meetings ever get."

He said the U.S. should tell Israel not to attack Iran's nuclear sites something, he suggested, the previous administration had done because of the adverse effects an attack would have on regional stability.

"I think we should make it clear to the Israelis that this is not something we would be comfortable with," he said. "I think the administration has made it abundantly clear, as has the previous administration, that unilateral military action would not be appreciated."

Amid the praise for U.S. policy, Mr. Scowcroft was most critical of Mr. Obama's efforts toward Arab-Israeli peace.

Rather than spending months trying to get Israel to freeze its construction of settlements on the West Bank and to get the Arab states to make gestures toward Israel, he said, the United States, Europe and Russia should table a plan to jump-start negotiations on creating a Palestinian state.

"I think it's time for a different role; the focus on settlements on the Israeli side and improving contacts on the Arab side, overflight rights and so on, is going for the capillaries at a time when that cannot produce good results," he said. "I have felt for some time that the two sides are unlikely in the foreseeable future to be able on their own to make the compromises necessary."