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From: Ashley Bommer [redacted]
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Sent: Sat May 08 21:58:34 2010
Subject:

Tensions between Eikenberry, McChrystal will be focus of their Washington visit

By Joshua Partlow
Sunday, May 9, 2010; A01

They are both decorated generals, West Point graduates who studied at Harvard University and earnest taskmasters who would rather work than sleep.

The U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl W. Eikenberry, and the top U.S. military commander there, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, assumed their posts amid lofty expectations that they could re-create the hand-in-glove partnership that Gen. David H. Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker had while leading the war effort in Iraq.

But the Eikenberry-and-McChrystal team that returns to Washington this week, alongside Afghan President Hamid Karzai, has a much different dynamic.

Both men said in interviews that they enjoy a productive relationship and have built stronger bonds between troops and civilians across Afghanistan. Still, they have had significant disagreements over the course of the Afghanistan war and have struggled to align their visions for how to work with Karzai's government, according to interviews with U.S., NATO and Afghan officials.

Few critics suggest that those differences have harmed U.S. interests in Afghanistan. People who have worked with both men said, however, that clear tensions exist at the top of the Obama administration's most important military and foreign policy endeavor.

At times their differences over strategy have been public, particularly after two of Eikenberry's cables to Washington last year were leaked to the news media. The cables warned that McChrystal's request for new troops might be counterproductive as Karzai was "not an adequate strategic partner." McChrystal's staff

members were particularly upset that they weren't made aware of Eikenberry's position before he sent the cables to Washington, they said in interviews.

Eikenberry has resisted some of McChrystal's wartime experiments. The ambassador refused to release funds to expand a military effort to turn villagers into armed guards. He opposed one Army brigade's plan to form an anti-Taliban alliance with a Pashtun tribe and funnel it development money. He criticized the military's proposal to buy generators and diesel fuel for the energy-starved city of Kandahar and supported a longer-term hydroelectric dam project.

Their views have diverged despite shared experience: Eikenberry served 18 months as the NATO commander in Afghanistan, the job McChrystal now holds, before retiring from the military and returning as ambassador. As McChrystal has overhauled the war strategy, some of the legacy he is undoing is Eikenberry's.

Eikenberry wanted to become NATO's senior civilian representative, in addition to his job as ambassador, but McChrystal recommended against it, according to diplomats in Kabul. A British diplomat, Mark Sedwill, got the job.

"You have two generals of similar rank who don't agree on the policy, who apparently don't like each other. It makes for a difficult relationship," said Peter W. Galbraith, who served as the top U.S. official in the United Nations' mission to Afghanistan during last year's contested presidential election.

Both men have tried to dispel notions that they disagree on strategy and don't get along.

"The best metaphor I can give you is of an athletic team," Eikenberry said. "We play different positions. We have different but complementary roles. Of course, sometimes we're going to disagree on what's the best play to call, but we're absolutely committed as teammates to see the president's strategy is well-executed."

McChrystal said that he and Eikenberry cooperate effectively and that their relationship should not be measured against the Petraeus-Crocker pairing in Iraq.

"We've known each other for many years. We talk through all the things we deal with," McChrystal said. "Some people are looking for an Iraq model. But Iraq wasn't a 46-nation coalition."

Civil-military integration

The two generals first crossed professional paths in 2002, when McChrystal, who had worked as chief of staff under Gen. Dan K. McNeill, then coalition commander, helped prepare Eikenberry for a job in Kabul building the fledgling Afghan National Army. Later, McChrystal ran the Joint Special Operations Command when Eikenberry held the top military job in Afghanistan.

They now work more independently because their roles aren't perfectly aligned, they said, with McChrystal in charge of the 130,000-strong NATO coalition, not just the American contingent.

Some disagreements between the men may reflect growing pains, as the military makes room for what has become the second-largest U.S. embassy in the world, after the one in Iraq. When President Obama took office last year, there were 360 American civilians in Afghanistan. Now there are more than 1,000 and counting, the most rapid growth of a U.S. civilian mission since the Vietnam War.

Military field commanders who once may have had political advisers now share authority with co-equal civilian representatives backed by growing staffs. The result is a more forceful civilian voice in decision-making.

When Eikenberry has resisted a military proposal, the rationale is often that he does not want to undermine the Afghan government and the development of its security forces. He says that he must take into account factors beyond short-term stability and that programs without Afghan government ownership won't be sustainable.

"I think that both of us are very proud of the degree of civil-military integration we've been able to achieve in the year that we've been here together," Eikenberry said. "So, of course, there's going to be different perspectives, there's going to be robust debates, and you really want that. You've got to encourage that."

Divided over Karzai

Perhaps the most visible difference in approach is how the men work with Karzai.

McChrystal has adopted a role akin to chief diplomat, building a close partnership with Karzai. In monthly White House review sessions, McChrystal has argued that U.S. officials should show more public deference to Karzai, who he frequently reminds others is "the elected leader of a sovereign country," administration officials said.

In the interview, McChrystal called Karzai a "great partner" who has been "absolutely straightforward with me and been reliable."

Some officials said he has built his relationship with Karzai at the expense of candor. In some instances, he has chosen a less politically controversial path, U.S. officials said, citing his decision to work with Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's half brother, rather than stress his alleged criminal activity.

"If I don't have credibility with President Karzai, then I think I can't be an effective commander here," McChrystal said. "And it doesn't mean just getting along with him and telling him what he wants to hear. It's convincing him that I'm being a reliable and honest interlocutor with him."

Eikenberry, meanwhile, has had to deliver tougher messages about corruption and governance that often upset Karzai, and his rapport with the mercurial president has seemed to suffer.

During a lengthy policy review in the fall, Eikenberry argued against sending additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan. And U.S. officials said he continues to think that the United States should find other Afghan figures, including provincial leaders, to work with rather than rely so heavily on Karzai. Eikenberry's position infuriated Karzai, who often views U.S. support for "sub-national governments" in Afghanistan as a threat to his authority.

Karzai is a cunning politician who has tried to play Eikenberry and McChrystal off each other and exploit any political differences, U.S. officials said. In recent months, when Karzai has come under U.S. pressure to reform his corrupt government, he has often lashed out publicly.

Since McChrystal took command in June, he has met Karzai more than 45 times, mostly one-on-one, including a regular Sunday morning chat in the presidential palace. In an effort to present Karzai as commander in chief, McChrystal has flown him across the country on five "battlefield circulations."

McChrystal has done more than his predecessors, including Eikenberry, to minimize civilian casualties, such as restricting the use of air power and night raids. He has regularly apologized to Karzai for civilian deaths and shown him video and slide presentations to explain how such mistakes occur.

"He was the first military man to really show that he respected and would respond to Karzai's agenda, civilian casualties, of course, being the biggest issue," one senior NATO official said. "In a sense, Karzai said, 'Here's a soldier that finally I can deal with.' "

Crocker, the former U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, said he and Petraeus rarely differed over policy or approach and carefully calibrated their relationship with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, another complicated leader. The two almost always saw Maliki together. When meeting him alone, they would brief each other before and after.

Of McChrystal and Eikenberry, Crocker said: "They need to resolve any differences among themselves or take it back to Washington because the stakes in Afghanistan are too great not to have a unified effort."

Partlow reported from Kabul. Staff writers Rajiv Chandrasekaran and Scott Wilson in Washington contributed to this report.

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