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Editors: Elaine Kanasewich and Jonathan Preece

Email: elaine.kanasewich@atlantic-council.ca, jonathan.preece@Atlantic-Council.ca

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Barack Obama's Nobel Prize: Implications for Afghanistan?

On October 9th American President Barack Obama was formally awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, evoking both criticism and acclaim. Having been in office for only nine months and being just the 3rd American president to win the award while in office, this choice was bound to create controversy. Many commentators were quick to assert that Mr.Obama has not yet 'done anything' in the sense of achieving concrete progress on many of his campaign promises related to international peace and security. A number of initiatives in areas such as nuclear non-proliferation, Israeli-Palestinian peace, and American diplomatic engagement with Iran remain in their infant stages having yet to produce tangible results. Obama himself accepted the award with a degree of caution; "I do not feel that I deserve to be in the company of so many of the transformative figures who have been honored by this prize, men and women who've inspired me and inspired the entire world through their courageous pursuit of peace." Indeed, sitting in the company of past winners such as Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Obama's Laureate title could rightly be judged premature.

However, a great many observers have also praised the Nobel Prize committee for recognizing Mr. Obama's success in setting a new agenda for peace and contributing to an atmosphere which is conducive to cooperation and more meaningful diplomatic engagement. The Nobel committee itself cited Obama's "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples...and create a new climate in international politics" as the rationale behind the naming of this award. Such sentiments were echoed by a number of NATO leaders. French president Nicolas Sarkozy said that the award marked "America's return to the hearts of the world's people" while German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that it was an "incentive to the president and to us all" to do more for peace. From this position, supporters of the announcement argue that Barack Obama's success has derived from his ability to shift American policy away from the widely unpopular unilateralist power politics of the Bush administration.

Thus considerable debate has emerged regarding the value of the Nobel Prize and whether or not Obama's rhetoric has had a meaningful impact on world politics. Indeed this award has highlighted divisive views on whether Obama has simply spent the last nine months delivering empty speeches citing the need for 'change' or whether his approach to American foreign affairs has actually had the effect of setting the international agenda and creating the conditions necessary for peace. However, moving

beyond the merits of the Nobel Prize itself is the more significant matter of how this announcement could impact American policy moving forward, specifically on the issue of Afghanistan.

It has been eight long years since the overthrow of the Taliban regime and prospects for the NATO led mission are cloudy. Mounting casualties and material costs coupled with a corruption-riddled Afghan national election has taken its toll on Western support for the ISAF mission. Recent public opinion polls not only indicate dwindling American support for overseas engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also a relative drop in American support for Obama himself. Against this backdrop, President Obama is faced with the task of responding to a request for increased deployment in Afghanistan while reevaluating American policy on this file [for more on this topic see “Between Pakistan and Afghanistan: No Rosy Scenario” below]. Some analysts have argued that the awkward timing of the Nobel Prize announcement could serve to complicate this already treacherous decision making process. For instance, this award announcement could provide cannon fodder for both Democrats and Republicans who oppose Obama’s plan of winding down efforts in Iraq while increasing troop numbers in Afghanistan. On the left there will be those who criticize Obama for any decision to increase troop size on the basis of hypocrisy: how could a Nobel Peace Laureate authorize increased and intensified conflict in Afghanistan? Conversely, this announcement may reinforce conservative criticisms that Obama’s hesitation on foreign policy issues such as Afghanistan indicates weakness.

On the other hand, some analysts have argued that Obama’s receipt of the Nobel Prize could prove to be a catalyst for a renewed commitment to the Afghan mission by the United States and its NATO allies. The public acclaim that this award has brought to Obama and his administration could have the effect of bolstering Obama’s stature and encouraging NATO leaders to commit to long-term operations. Obama himself referred to this award as a “call to action” for other world leaders to work together in confronting the most challenging issues facing our world today. This award could thus reinforce Obama’s message and, assuming that the Obama administration chooses to take a more active role in Afghanistan, promote more steadfast involvement by other NATO states at a time in which similar debate is taking place within their respective countries. After all, as the NATO led mission is marred by increased violence and political crises related to a lack of legitimate Afghan governance, American leadership and improved public opinion on this “war of necessity” might be just what the general ordered.

Those commenting on the potential effect of President Obama’s Nobel Prize on American policy towards Afghanistan are therefore split as to whether this announcement will prove to be a burden or a source of encouragement for the United States and its NATO allies. Of course the third view forwarded on this issue is that this award will have little or no effect in real policy terms. Indeed more cynical observers have argued that difficulties on the ground, rather than the popularity of the American President, is ultimately what will determine the success of NATO’s mission in Afghanistan. Only time will tell.

Live links to articles: [Surprise Nobel for Obama Stirs Praise and Doubts](#), [Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize Elicits Surprised, Divided Reactions](#), [Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize too Hasty](#), [Obama’s Nobel Win Draws Mixed Reaction](#), [Was Obama’s Nobel for “Awsomeness” and Positive Thinking? Nobel Prize](#), [Obama and a Stirred Hornet’s Nest, Ignatieff](#), [Obama and a Renewed ‘Politics of Hope’](#), [World Reaction to Obama Winning the Nobel](#), [Road to the Nobel Prize](#), [Analysts Warn Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize Complicates War Efforts](#), [Obama’s War](#), [Obama’s Faltering War](#), [Gates Gives Obama Afghan Troop Request](#),

Between Pakistan and Afghanistan: No Rosy Scenario

US President Barack Obama has reached a strategic crossroads less than six months after announcing a new strategic direction for Afghanistan. Nearly two weeks ago, his top commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal asked for an additional 40,000 troops to perform counter-insurgency operations. In the face of growing opposition towards the war among the American public and his own party, President Obama has yet to make a decision on the request. Making matters worse is the conflicting opinion among Obama's own advisors as to how to proceed. Obama's Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, is in favour of raising troop levels, while National Security Advisor, and former NATO Supreme Allied Commander General James Jones is wary of doing so. The most vocal and influential opponent of a troop increase is, however, Vice-President Joe Biden, who argues that the real threat lies in the remote areas of Pakistan where al Qaeda's top commanders hide. Consequently, as the deliberations draw on, the US is putting pressure on Pakistan to take the battle to its border regions.

In response, the Pakistani army initiated a massive attack in South Waziristan, a region along the Afghan border where top al Qaeda leaders are believed to be operating. Pakistan estimates that there are roughly 10,000 Taliban and 1,000 foreign fighters in the region, and has responded with heavy aerial bombings and over 28,000 troops. But even if Pakistan does take on a greater role in the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban, questions remain about the impact this will have on Afghanistan. Some fear that these offensives will only drive the terrorists back into Afghanistan. Others argue that it might displace these terrorist to places like Somalia or Yemen, where they can remain a threat. American officials admit that this offensive will likely not prove decisive for Afghanistan, but that it does an important job in demonstrating the will of Pakistan to take on al Qaeda and their support of the Taliban.

President Obama's decision on increasing troop levels is complicated by the lack of a clear result from the August 20th Afghan election where severe allegations of fraud have largely wiped out any feelings of confidence in the Karzai government. As US Senator John Kerry stated, unless the Afghan government can prove it will work towards good governance, it would be irresponsible for the US to send more troops to Afghanistan. Canadian Defence Minister Peter MacKay echoed this sentiment, stating that unless there is a solid partner in Afghanistan, sending more troops would prove difficult. Meanwhile, a special UN-audit committee invalidated nearly one-third of the votes cast for Karzai, dropping him below the 50% threshold and forcing a run-off election scheduled for November 7th.

After some initial hesitation, Karzai bowed to international pressure and agreed to participate in this constitutionally mandated process. However there are concerns that voter apathy and distrust steaming from fraud allegations combined with threats of insurgent violence will keep voters away from the polls this November – an issue which could further undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government. International observers had hoped that a power sharing deal would be struck between Abdullah and Karzai thus rendering a second election unnecessary. However, as hasty preparations for the runoff election move forward, this alternative appears increasingly unlikely. In fact, political tension increased over the weekend when Abdullah publicly demanded the removal of the head of the Afghan Election Commission for his supposed alignment with Karzai. Indeed things are getting evermore complicated. After five war councils and with more planned for the weeks to come, the White House admits that a decision on whether to grant General McChrystal's request for up to 40,000 more troops is still a month away. Whether Afghanistan can wait that long is yet to be seen.

[General Stanley McChrystal opts for 40,000 more troops in Afghanistan](#), [Into Waziristan](#), [An Offensive Against the Taliban](#), [Under Pressure, Pakistani Army Pushes into South Waziristan](#), [South Asia: US Senator warns on Afghan troops](#), [Obama's 'drift' on troops spur revolt](#), [Pakistan, Taliban both claim success in Afghanistan](#), [Pakistan Aims Offensive at a Militant Stronghold](#), [Deal to Avoid Afghan run-off Unlikely](#), [Harper Urges Afghans to Vote in Run-off, Despite Taliban Threats](#), [The Afghan Runoff: Will it Be a No-Show Election?](#) [Karzai Rival Issues Conditions for Afghan Runoff](#), [Afghan Runoff Election Prompts Steps to Fight Fraud](#), [Audit Pushes Karzai Below 50 Percent in Afghan Vote](#). [Afghanistan's flawed elections. Not Half, Mr. Karzai.](#)

Recommended Readings

US VP Biden Woos Poland After Missile Program Cut

International Herald Tribune, 10-21-2009

The Polish Government has agreed to host components of a new US European Missile Defence shield, putting an end to speculation that the Obama administration was turning its back on Eastern Europe. Last month, Obama cancelled the Bush-era Missile Defence system which was aimed at countering Iranian intercontinental ballistic missiles. Citing new intelligence which shows that Iran's long-range missile program is not yet a threat, the Obama administration has opted to deploy a shorter range, more mobile missile defence system. Poland is the first Eastern European country to agree to participate in the project, and US Vice-President Joe Biden will travel to Romania and the Czech Republic to solicit their participation as well. The Vice-President's trip will simultaneously set minds at ease regarding America's commitment to Eastern European and NATO Allies. Many took the cancellation of the Bush-era missile defence system as a sign Obama was more interested in building relations with Russia. Instead, the US says the new system will offer more reliable protection for NATO and continue demonstrating their commitment to old allies.

Read the full text [here](#).

Ukraine Party Selects Favorite for Presidential Vote

American Free Press, 10-23-2009

The Central Election Committee of Ukraine announced the official opening of national election campaigns earlier this week with elections scheduled for January 27. Predictions for Ukraine's first election since the 2004 Orange Revolution, place incumbent President Viktor Yushchenko, PM Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovich as early favorites. While the election campaign is just in its preliminary stages, analysts have already pointed out that the outcome of this election could have implications for Ukraine-NATO relations.

Since being elected in 2004, Mr. Yushchenko has continually pressed the importance of Ukrainian membership in NATO as part of what has been widely considered a pro-Western foreign policy. However early indications are that Mr. Yushchenko will be in for a fight during this election as victory is anything but guaranteed. Yushchenko's main opposition, Viktor Yanukovich, has emphasized a foreign policy platform which differs greatly from the incumbent President's and could thus have consequences for Ukraine's relations with the West.

Mr. Yanukovich has proposed that Ukraine follow a balanced foreign policy based on the goal of ensuring that Ukraine remains “a state outside any bloc.” He has stated that his approach would see Ukraine improving relations with Moscow while at the same time working towards EU integration and establishing closer ties with Washington, it has been argued that the election of Mr. Yanukovich could lead to a more Eastern leaning Ukraine. In the past Mr. Yanukovich has been characterized as part of the old Soviet guard and, as leader of Ukraine’s Regions Party, derives the majority of his support from the country’s predominantly Russian-speaking east. For her part, Yulia Tymoshenko has also hinted at a less Western oriented Ukrainian foreign policy, however a concrete position has yet to emerge. In any case, Ukraine’s January elections could be of great significance for this former Soviet nation’s relations with NATO and the Western world more generally.

Read Full text [here](#).

Sources: BBC, Bloomberg, Calgary Herald, Canadian Press, CNN, International Herald Tribune, CBC, Economist, Macleans, Fox News, New York Times, Spiegel International Online, The Australian The Globe and Mail, The Guardian, The Toronto Star, Time, Wall Street Journal

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