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U.S. Envoy's Cables Show Concerns on Afghan War Plans

By [ERIC SCHMITT](#)

WASHINGTON — The United States ambassador in Kabul warned his superiors here in November that President [Hamid Karzai](#) of Afghanistan “is not an adequate strategic partner” and “continues to shun responsibility for any sovereign burden,” according to a classified cable that offers a much bleaker accounting of the risks of sending additional American troops to Afghanistan than was previously known.

The [broad outlines of two cables from the ambassador, Karl W. Eikenberry](#), became public within days after he sent them, and they were portrayed as having been the source of significant discussion in the White House, heightening tensions between diplomats and senior military officers, who supported an increase of 30,000 American troops.

But [the full cables](#), obtained by The New York Times, show for the first time just how strongly the current ambassador felt about the leadership of the Afghan government, the state of its military and the chances that a troop buildup would actually hurt the war effort by making the Karzai government too dependent on the United States.

The cables — one four pages, the other three — also represent a detailed rebuttal to the counterinsurgency strategy offered by Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), the top American and [NATO](#) commander in Afghanistan, who had argued that a rapid infusion of fresh troops was essential to avoid failure in the country.

They show that Mr. Eikenberry, a retired [Army](#) lieutenant general who once was the top American commander in Afghanistan, repeatedly cautioned that deploying sizable American reinforcements would result in “astronomical costs” — tens of billions of dollars — and would only deepen the dependence of the Afghan government on the United States.

“Sending additional forces will delay the day when Afghans will take over, and make it difficult, if not impossible, to bring our people home on a reasonable timetable,” he wrote Nov. 6. “An increased U.S. and foreign role in security and governance will increase Afghan dependence, at least in the short-term.”

Without offering details, [Mr. Eikenberry has said in public hearings since then](#) that his concerns have been dealt with, and that he supported the White House's troop increase plan.

But it is not clear what might have changed about his assessment of President Karzai as a reliable partner, and the strong language of the cables may increase tensions between the ambassador and the Karzai government, especially as world leaders meet in London on Thursday to discuss a much-debated Afghan plan to reintegrate [Taliban](#) fighters. It also coincides with a strong effort by the administration to mend ties with

Mr. Karzai.

An American official provided a copy of the cables to The Times after a reporter requested them. The official said it was important for the historical record that Mr. Eikenberry's detailed assessments be made public, given that they were among the most important documents produced during the debate that led to the troop buildup.

On Nov. 6, Mr. Eikenberry wrote: "President Karzai is not an adequate strategic partner. The proposed counterinsurgency strategy assumes an Afghan political leadership that is both able to take responsibility and to exert sovereignty in the furtherance of our goal — a secure, peaceful, minimally self-sufficient Afghanistan hardened against transnational terrorist groups.

"Yet Karzai continues to shun responsibility for any sovereign burden, whether defense, governance or development. He and much of his circle do not want the U.S. to leave and are only too happy to see us invest further," Mr. Eikenberry wrote. "They assume we covet their territory for a never-ending 'war on terror' and for military bases to use against surrounding powers."

He continued, "Beyond Karzai himself, there is no political ruling class that provides an overarching national identity that transcends local affiliations and provides reliable partnership."

In a second cable, dated Nov. 9, he expressed new concerns: "In a [PBS](#) interview on November 7, Karzai sounded bizarrely cautionary notes about his willingness to address governance and corruption. This tracks with his record of inaction or grudging compliance in this area."

On Monday, Mr. Eikenberry declined through an embassy spokeswoman, Caitlin M. Hayden, to comment on the cables and his views on Mr. Karzai. She said by e-mail, "We stand by what we provided during the review process, which got us to the clear strategy we're now implementing, that the ambassador unequivocally supports."

In his memos, Mr. Eikenberry raised other concerns. He said he had serious doubts about the ability of the Afghan police and military forces to take over security duties in the country by 2013. "The Army's high attrition and low recruitment rates for Pashtuns in the south are crippling," he wrote. "Simply keeping the force at current levels requires tens of thousands of new recruits every year to replace attrition losses and battlefield casualties."

The ambassador, who left the military last April to become Mr. Obama's emissary, also complained about an inadequate civilian counterpart organization to the NATO military command in Afghanistan. Nearly three months later, he is still expressing concerns about too few civilian experts in Afghanistan.

He also noted worries that the success of Mr. Obama's Afghanistan policy hinged on Pakistani forces' eliminating militants' havens in the mountainous region near the Afghan border.

"Pakistan will remain the single greatest source of Afghan instability so long as the border sanctuaries remain," he wrote. "Until this sanctuary problem is fully addressed, the gains from sending additional forces may be fleeting."

“As we contemplate greatly expanding our presence in Afghanistan, the better answer to our difficulties could well be to further ratchet up our engagement in Pakistan,” he wrote without elaboration.

On Nov. 9, he repeatedly warned against rushing into a large deployment of more American forces without further study.

He urged that the White House appoint a bipartisan panel of “civilian and military experts to examine the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy” and provide recommendations by the end of 2009. The recommendation, which would have extended a White House-led policy review of many months, was not accepted.

Mr. Eikenberry suggested sending a relatively small force to train Afghan security forces and protect some population centers, and to condition more troops on the Afghans’ meeting objectives, like committing to taking full responsibility for national defense by a specific date.

And while General McChrystal warned of failure if additional troops were not deployed, Mr. Eikenberry concluded by cautioning of competing risks “that we will become more deeply engaged here with no way to extricate ourselves, short of allowing the country to descend again into lawlessness and chaos.”

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