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The upcoming announcement by Obama detailing the pace of the military withdrawal from Afghanistan will be more than a simple question of numbers: it could signal a new political stage in the war in Afghanistan and the implicit recognition that the troop increase backed by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and the Armed Forces has not been as successful as had been hoped.

In his most recent reviews of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Obama has allowed the position of the Defense Department and the Armed Forces in favor of maintaining a strong military presence in Afghanistan to prevail over other voices in the Administration and civil society, which advocated for a strategic shift including a clear troop reduction. To date, the military has argued that more troops were necessary to launch a series of offensives that would weaken the Taliban insurgency as advances were made in the training of the Afghan armed forces. Negotiations with the Taliban could thereafter take place from a position of strength.

In Bob Woodward's book, "Obama's Wars," the author describes in painful detail the frustration felt by Vice-President Biden, the then representative for Afpak, Richard Holbrooke, and other members of the administration who were calling for a more limited military presence centered on attacking Al-Qaeda shelters in Pakistan and moving toward a political solution in Afghanistan that would include negotiations with the Taliban.

Now, following the death of Bin Laden and the agreement on the 2014 withdrawal of all international troops, it appears that the U.S. is prepared to accelerate the pace of withdrawal. According to the Times of London, an initial withdrawal of some 5,000 troops could in fact end up entailing the full contingent of 30,000 additional troops in service.

There are good grounds for defending an accelerated withdrawal. Though significant victories have been achieved in the strategic offensives in Helmand and Kandahar, they have taken place through nighttime raids and attacks that have infuriated many Afghans, more opposed than ever to the international military presence in their country. So much so that following the latest mas-

sacre of civilians due to NATO air attacks, President Karzai was obliged to issue a “last warning” to the U.S. Moreover, advances in the south have been overshadowed by a clear deterioration in previously quiet zones in the North and East of the country.

In addition, the greatest success of the U.S.—the death of Bin Laden—came about through an air attack in Pakistani territory, precisely by means of the counterterrorist strategy that Vice-President Biden and others argued was preferable to a counterinsurgency in Afghan territory.

Obama will hear the military contend that withdrawal should be slow so as not to allow breathing space to an insurgency weakened after the death of Bin Laden and other key figures. General Petraeus—who in late June will assume the position of Director of the CIA in place of Leon Panetta—has already warned that advances in the South are “fragile and reversible.”

This time around, in addition to Biden, Obama will listen to more voices in favor of a change in strategy. The new National Security Advisor, Thomas E. Donilon, is more favorable to a rapid withdrawal and supports pushing for a political solution. And Obama’s political advisors will continue to remind him that half of the American public continues to be opposed to the mission in Afghanistan, and that the costs of the war (calculated to be some 2 billion dollars a week) are more and more indefensible for the Democrats in Congress.

It therefore appears that many factors are converging in favor of an accelerated withdrawal of United States troops that ought to signal the start of a new stage—also long but perhaps final—in the war in Afghanistan.

This stage could be marked by an official declaration announcing that negotiations with the Taliban have begun. Such negotiations are already under way informally, and they may be moved forward by the forthcoming decision by the UN, made public by the New York Times, to strike several Afghan Taliban leaders from their “black list” of sanctioned individuals. The scenario for this new stage could be the December summit meeting that will be held in Berlin for the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

But perhaps the most important effect of an accelerated withdrawal and the announcement of formal negotiations would be for the U.S. to begin to take more seriously the true challenges to the future of Afghanistan, which are not the periodic advances or withdrawals of the insurgency in Afghan territory but, first and foremost, to come to terms with instability in Pakistan.

To do so, the U.S. will have to calm Pakistani fears regarding the growing Indian presence in Afghanistan, and help to reduce the wave of radical Islamist assaults that are shaking up the country. An accelerated withdrawal from Afghanistan and a new regional perspective based on multilateral negotiations could also contribute to stability in Pakistan and the region. Without this stability it will be difficult to alleviate the difficult economic and social situation that the Pakistani people, desperate in the face of the incompetence of their political leaders and the ineptitude of the military command, are experiencing.

The stability and peaceful development of Afghanistan and Pakistan therefore appear to be more interrelated than ever. It is urgent to start a new stage. Obama must rise to the occasion.