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Taliban Attacks Weaken US, NATO Position

By Jim Lobe

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Sunday's well-orchestrated — if unsuccessful — attacks by Taliban forces on Kabul and three provincial capitals in eastern Afghanistan could further shake ebbing public confidence in the U.S. and its allies that their strategy for securing Afghanistan is working.

Billed as the opening of the Taliban's spring offensive, the attacks also raise new questions about the timing and pace of the planned U.S. withdrawal from the country, as well as the fate of a longer-term strategic agreement that is currently being negotiated between Kabul and Washington.

Just a week before the attacks, an [ABC News/Washington Post poll](#) showed that public support for the war in Afghanistan had plunged to an all-time low, with only 30% of respondents saying that they believed the conflict was worth fighting. It was the first poll in which a majority of self-identified Republicans agreed with that proposition.

Moreover, 62% of respondents said they believed that most Afghans oppose what the U.S. is trying to do there.

Tuesday's announcement by Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard that Australia will accelerate its planned withdrawal from Afghanistan strikes yet another blow at Washington's hopes of retaining help from its Western allies through the end of 2014, the deadline that NATO agreed last year for the final departure of all NATO combat troops.

Citing improvements — despite Sunday's attacks — in the security situation in Afghanistan, Gillard pledged to have sent most of her country's 1,550 troops in Afghanistan home by the end of 2013.

That timetable was similar to the one adopted in January by President Nicolas Sarkozy for the withdrawal of almost 4,000 French troops after four French soldiers were shot and killed by an Afghan recruit in one of the worst of a growing number of incidents of what has become known as "Green on Blue" attacks. Until then, Paris, along with the rest of NATO, had pledged to stay through the end of 2014.

Whether others will also speed up their own withdrawal plans is likely to be the subject of much corridor talk later this week when NATO defense ministers meet in Brussels and again at next month's NATO summit in Chicago where Obama is expected to press his fellow leaders to commit as many troops as possible until the end of 2014 and as many advisers and as much money as possible beyond that date.

Obama himself has pledged to withdraw some 22,000 of the remaining 90,000 U.S. combat troops in Afghanistan by the end of September. But how quickly to withdraw the remaining 68,000 troops between then and the end of 2014 remains a source of heated debate both within the administration and between Republicans and Democrats in Congress.

Backed by most Democratic lawmakers, Vice President Joe Biden and Obama's national security adviser, Tom Donilon, reportedly favor a relatively quick pace that would reduce U.S. troop levels to about 40,000 by mid-2013. But military commanders, supported by most Republicans in spite of the new poll findings, have pressed for a halt to further withdrawals after this fall through the "fighting season" in 2013.

The U.S. "will need significant combat power through the end of 2013," said Gen. John Allen, the U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, recently.

Sunday's attacks are certain to feed this debate, as have other recent debacles, including the accidental burning by U.S. soldiers of copies of the Quran outside Bagram Air Base and the murderous nighttime rampage of one disturbed U.S. soldier who killed 16 civilians, including nine children, near Kandahar.

The attacks, which most analysts have said bore the hallmarks of the Taliban's Pakistan-based Haqqani faction, included three discrete assaults in Kabul, and two in Jalalabad, one in Gardez, and another in Pul-e-Alam in the eastern part of the country where the U.S. has tried to build up its forces over the last several months.

Altogether, only 39 Taliban fighters — almost all of whom were eventually killed — took part in the attacks, but, as noted by officials in Washington, each assault must have required help from dozens of others who provided intelligence, weapons and ammunition, logistics, and other forms of support in order for such a complex operation to be carried out.

In Kabul, considered the safest city in the country, the attacks brought normal life and commerce to a halt for as much as 18 hours. While the Afghan army and police bore the brunt of the fighting — 11 servicemen were killed — the battle in Kabul was brought to an end only after several U.S. helicopter gunships repeatedly strafed construction sites occupied by the insurgents.

It was the most fighting that has taken place in the capital since the U.S.-led offensive chased the Taliban out of power in the fall of 2001. The U.S. embassy and a NATO base there came under attack last September, but the fighting then was much less protracted and intense.

While there is little question that the size and scope of Sunday's attacks caught Afghan government, U.S., and NATO officials by complete surprise, demonstrating what Afghan President Hamid Karzai's office called "an intelligence failure for us and especially for NATO," officials and analysts were divided about their implications for the debate in the U.S.

Allen and those who oppose a rapid withdrawal expressed satisfaction with the response and performance of the Afghan government forces.

"No one is underestimating the seriousness of today's attacks," Gen. John Allen, the NATO commander in Afghanistan, said in a statement. "Each attack was meant to send a message: that legitimate governance and Afghan sovereignty are in peril. The [Afghan security forces] response itself is proof enough of that folly."

Max Boot, a prominent neoconservative military analyst, argued in *Commentary's* Contentions blog that the attack was actually a sign of weakness on the part of the Taliban, noting that "the insurgents had to stage their attacks from abandoned buildings, which suggests they do not have too much support in the capital."

But others said the attacks marked a show of strength on the part of the insurgency and pointed to the reliance by the Afghan security forces on U.S. and Western advisers who accompanied them in the course of the day, as well as the apparent necessity of engaging U.S. gunships in the battle, at least toward the end of the fighting.

"While this wasn't the [1968] Tet offensive [by the Viet Cong in Vietnam], if they can pull off something like this in what is supposed to be the safest part of Afghanistan — and attack three other cities at the same time — it's not very encouraging," one administration official told IPS. "And it isn't going to help boost public support for the war."