



Written by on October 1, 2009

McChrystal Assesses Afghanistan at the IISS

Speaking at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) on October 1, U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, warned that success in Afghanistan is not assured.

"It is complex difficult terrain, both the land and the people, it is a tribal society with a culture vastly different from what most of us are familiar with and it varies around the country, so you cannot assume what is true in one province is true in another," said the general.



"The situation is serious and I choose that word very, very carefully," McChrystal was quoted as saying by the *Times* of London. "Neither success nor failure in our endeavor in support of the Afghan people and government can be taken for granted."

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McChrystal told the audience assembled at historic Aruendel House, headquarters of the prestigious think tank, that determining who is winning the war at present depends upon who is asked. He noted: "We are not the scorekeepers, not NATO, ISAF, not our governments, not even our press. The perception on all those entities will matter, they will affect the situation, but in the end this is going to be decided in the minds and the perceptions of the Afghan people."

Paul Reynolds, BBC's world affairs correspondent observed that McChrystal's strategy for success in Afghanistan can be summed up by his phrase: "We don't win by body count — we win when the people decide we win."

The commander continued by outlining what his forces must do differently to contain the Taliban insurgency: "We must gain the initiative by reversing the perceived momentum of the insurgents. We must seek rapid growth of Afghan national security forces, and that is the army and the police, and we must improve their effectiveness and our own through closer partnering, and this means we must plan together, live together, operate together and take advantage of each other's strengths as we move forward."

A sense of urgency was apparent in McChrystal's statement as he said: "We need to reverse the current trends, and time does matter. Waiting does not prolong a favorable outcome. This effort will not remain winnable indefinitely, public support will not last indefinitely, but the cruel irony is to succeed, we need patience, discipline, resolve and time."

McChrystal has reportedly requested as many as 40,000 additional U.S. troops to assist in bringing security and stability to Afghanistan, and President Obama and other NATO leaders are apparently considering that request.

When asked if a refusal to give him more troops would lead to failure in Afghanistan, he said: "I think if you don't align the goals and the resources, you will have a significant problem. If we don't do that, we



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will.”

The *New York Times* reported that McChrystal’s visit to the IISS came the day after he had participated in a White House strategy session on the war by video link. The session included President Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and a group of senior administration advisers.

An attendee at the session asked McChrystal if he would support an idea put forward by Biden to scale back the American military presence in Afghanistan in order to focus on tracking down the leaders of al-Qaeda, instead of devoting so many resources to defeat the Taliban.

“The short answer is: no,” he said. “You have to navigate from where you are, not where you wish to be. A strategy that does not leave Afghanistan in a stable position is probably a short-sighted strategy.”

Almost as significant as what General McChrystal had to say in London was *where* he said it. In so doing, he followed in the footsteps of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who defended the war during an address to the IISS on Afghanistan on September 4.

Recalling that in July, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates sent an assessment group of about a dozen analysts to Kabul to meet with McChrystal and advise the commander about improving U.S. military strategy — and that the result of that meeting was a 66-page report that the general sent to Defense Secretary Robert Gates on August 30 — it is interesting to study the organizational affiliations of the various people connected with this train of strategic planning.

The team sent to advise McChrystal included Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who was once a national security assistant to Senator John McCain on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Another member of the team was Stephen Biddle, a military analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington. Senator McCain, Defense Secretary Gates, and General McChrystal are all members of the internationalist Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), one of several prestigious U.S. and British “think tanks” (by their own description) that have coordinated and promoted interventionist foreign policies between the two English speaking nations from the aftermath of World War I. (The CFR was forged largely in response to the rejection by the U.S. Senate of American participation in the old League of Nations.)

The CFR, founded in 1921, has a sister organization in London, founded in 1920, originally called the Institute of International Affairs (later, The Royal Institute of International Affairs). Headquartered since 1923 at historic Chatham House at 10 St. James’s Square in London, the Institute became so synonymous with the building that it was officially rebranded as “Chatham House” in September 2004.

Chatham House’s American “sister,” the CFR, also enjoys the prestige of being headquartered in an historic townhouse, New York’s Harold Pratt House.

The IISS fits the model perfectly of being yet another internationalist “think tank” like the other two, even down to ensconcing itself in London’s historic Arundel House, which dates to the 16th century.

Moreover, even a cursory study reveals a definite cross-pollination of personnel between the IISS and McChrystal’s CFR. A few such examples are:

- Dr. Jonathan D. Pollack, professor of Asian and Pacific Studies and director of the Strategic Research Department at the Naval War College. *Pollack is a member of both the CFR and the IISS.*
- Dr. Bates Gill, director of The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). *Gill is a member of both the CFR and the IISS.*



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- Gary Samore, former National Security Council staffer during the Clinton administration and long-time State Department official, who became the CFR's director of studies in October 2006. *Prior to assuming his position at the CFR, Samore was director of studies at the IISS.*
- Dr. Charles A. Kupchan, a *senior fellow and director of Europe Studies at the CFR*. He has served as a visiting scholar at Harvard University's Center for International Affairs, Columbia University's Institute for War and Peace Studies, *and the IISS.*
- Stephen Flanagan, senior vice president and Henry A. Kissinger Chair at CSIS (Center for Strategic & International Studies). *Flanagan is a member of both the CFR and the IISS.*
- Dr. Vincent Davis, the Patterson Chair Professor at the University of Kentucky's Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce. *Davis is a member of both the CFR and the IISS.*

With the IISS and the CFR sharing so many prestigious members in common, it would be fair to conclude that both "think tanks" (along with Chatham House and others) share a penchant for "internationalism," which may be defined as advocating a foreign policy that favors intervention in the affairs of nations other than one's own. While advocates of such a policy usually defend its value in the name of advancing "world peace," since its adoption by the United States, Britain, and other Western powers at the conclusion of "the war to end all wars," the world has seen more years of warfare than peace.

And when peace fails and it is time to go to war, the United States has often placed members of the CFR in command. During the war in Vietnam, generals Lyman Lemnitzer, Maxwell Taylor, William Westmoreland, and Andrew Goodpaster — like McChrystal — were all CFR members.

Photo of Gen. Stanley McChrystal: AP Images



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