Triumph for Civil-Military Relations?

Derek S. Reveron

Relieving General Stanley McChrystal could not have been an easy decision for President Obama. In this speech, he emphasized McChrystal’s patriotism and accomplishments and thanked him for decades of service to the United States. However, he was relieved for poor judgment and not competence.

This particular episode of [civil-military relations](http://www.press.georgetown.edu/detail.html?session=7bec0863a7ffb063fff6dbf22b30e321&cat=1&id=9781589017085) also serves as a reminder to all officers that they do more than fight wars. Admirals and Generals are also policy actors. But filling a policy role is not without some peril to the military; civilian control is the law. When military leaders do get out of step with the administration or show disrespect, they are let go. Admiral Fallon was relieved in spring 2008 because of perceived differences with President Bush on Iran. General David McKiernan was replaced to bring fresh ideas to Afghanistan in 2009. And now McKiernan’s successor, General Stanley McChrystal, was relieved. Up to this point, McChrystal precariously navigated the civil-military divide during key policy debates, but ultimately undermined his own position.

The [*Rolling Stone*](http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/17390/119236)profile was certainly outrageous and damaging, but President Obama appointed General McChrystal last year to bring fresh ideas to supporting Afghanistan claim its sovereignty. To date, efforts have been slow, but McChrystal, who is an accomplished soldier and leader, has refocused the United States on Afghanistan. But McChrystal forgot himself and lost the confidence of the president guaranteeing his departure.

Given the size and scope of the U.S. military, President Obama recognized that no single person is responsible for success in Afghanistan. Fortunately, he had choices, which is a good sign of how healthy the U.S. military officer corps is. By going with General David Petraeus, however, the President is emphasizing continuity with the current policy and the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign. Petraeus was not only the architect of United States counterinsurgency doctrine and implemented the strategy in Iraq, but also served as one of General McChrystal’s bosses (the other is NATO commander Admiral Jim Stavridis).

As General David Petraeus takes the reins in Kabul, we are reminded that military leaders like him are viewed as capable of “getting the job done.” General Petraeus certainly knows counterinsurgency, is adept in the political-military circles he must travel, and understands the importance of coalition operations. But when it comes to counterinsurgency, we must remember that ultimate success is dependent on Afghanistan’s government, civil society, economy, and Afghan security forces.

External actors are limited in what they can accomplish. NATO can train Afghan police and military forces, but can they provide security? NATO can fund civil-reconstruction projects, but will it promote development? NATO can provide time and space for political efforts, but can President Karzai bring national reconciliation to his war-ravaged country?

Only time will tell.

As we enter the tenth year of operations this fall, the clock is certainly ticking. But as attention is now focused on General Petraeus, let’s not forget it’s the Afghans’ war.