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End America's busted nation-building in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is a bust. The Taliban is expanding its control. The number of “security incidents” was up a fifth in the last months of 2015 over the previous year. Popular confidence is at its lowest level in a decade. U.S. military officers now speak of a “goal line” defense of Kabul.

While the deadly geopolitical game is not yet over, it is hard to see how the current regime can survive without Washington's continued combat support. The nation-building mission always was quixotic.

Indeed, the latest report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction shows how far this Central Asian land was and remains from developed status. And how ineffective U.S. aid programs have been in transforming it.

While Afghanistan enjoyed some boom years in the flood of Western cash, the foreign money also inflamed the problem of corruption. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute explained: “The significant amount of aid and vast international military spending post-2001 has re-ingrained a culture of aid-rentierism: the Afghan elite competes internally for political rents from the international community.”

Tougher times have not increased honesty. In its latest quarterly report, SIGAR noted that a recent Afghan task force “reportedly found that millions of dollars were being embezzled while Afghanistan pays for numerous nonexistent ‘ghost’ schools, ‘ghost’ teachers, and ‘ghost’ students.”

Even worse, the same practice apparently afflicts the security forces. SIGAR cited an Associated Press investigation: “In that report, a provincial council member estimated 40 percent of the security forces in Helmand do not exist, while a former provincial deputy police chief said the actual number was ‘nowhere near’ the 31,000 police on the registers, and an Afghan official estimated the total ANDSF number at around 120,000 — less than half the reported 322,638.”

Security never has been good during the conflict. Today it is worse than ever.

Explained SIGAR: “The Taliban now controls more territory than at any time since 2001. Vicious and repeated attacks in Kabul this quarter shook confidence in the national-unity government. A year after the Coalition handed responsibility for Afghan security to the Afghan

National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), American and British forces were compelled on several occasions to support ANDSF troops in combat against the Taliban.”

Yet the failure of U.S. aid programs reaches well beyond insecurity. Despite pouring \$113.1 billion into Afghanistan, Washington has surprisingly few sustainable, long-term benefits to show for it.

Citing just a few of its earlier audits, SIGAR reported on Afghan government agencies suffering from “divergent approaches and a lack of overall strategy, poor coordination and limited information sharing,” and unable to “handle contract research, awards, and management.” U.S.-funded “power and water systems [were] inoperable for lack of fuel” while an industrial park had minimal occupancy.

Its latest audits yielded little better results.

USAID devoted \$488 million to develop Afghanistan’s oil, gas, and minerals industries. SIGAR found “limited progress overall.” Afghan ministries weren’t committed to reforms, “many mining operations are still controlled by political elites, warlords, military personnel, and the police,” transportation networks were inadequate, and several projects showed no results.

Tens of millions of dollars went for training and equipping an Afghan National Engineer Brigade. The NEB was hampered by “army staff on leave for holidays, political events, low literacy levels, and security concerns.” The brigade “lacked initiative” and “was not capable of carrying out its mission.”

Some \$2.3 billion in USAID money went for stability programs, yet, said SIGAR, “villages that received USAID assistance showed a marked decrease in their stability scores relative to the overall decrease in stability scores for both villages that did and those that did not receive USAID assistance.”

The official line remains positive. On one of my visits to Afghanistan a Marine Corps officer warned me that “everyone is selling something.” Private reports were different than the glowing reviews from my NATO handlers.

As I point out on Forbes: “The U.S. has been fighting in Afghanistan for more than 14 years. It’s time to bring home the troops. No more Americans should die in Afghanistan for nothing.”

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