



## Obama should be honest with Karzai on Afghanistan

By: Malou Innocent - January 10th, 2013

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It is fitting that Afghan President Hamid Karzai visits Washington this week after months of wrangling over the fiscal cliff. Americans descry their country's massive debt and oppose an 11-year war funded largely through deficit spending. Karzai's trip provides the American people with a subtle reminder of President Barack Obama's proclamation that it's time to do "nation building at home." In keeping with that pledge, the president should scale-back expectations of America's long-term civil-military assistance to Afghanistan when he meets with Karzai on Friday.

Some in Washington charge that opposition to an indefinite presence or ongoing assistance amounts to abandonment, defeatism, and throwing up our hands and just walking away. Not so. It stems from a judgment of whether the benefits will offset the costs. Over the last four years, U.S. officials committed increasing levels of military and economic means without offering any hope of achieving a stable, political end.

Whether the effort was "clear, hold, build" or "government-in-a-box," part of the problem was that Kabul's interests and Washington's were always gravely misaligned, be it on drone strikes, night raids, detention policy, regional relations, expatriate behavior, anti-corruption measures, or foreign immunity. Those outstanding differences persist amid deeper questions over how the coalition plans to reach a broader political settlement and stem the country's slide toward civil war during its planned transition and the country's upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections.

Current efforts to train Afghans to fight the insurgency on their own cuts America's own costs considerably. Still, shifting from a combat to a support function should not imply a commitment of resources either indefinitely or without scrutiny. As the International Crisis Group revealed in an October report, powerful patronage networks in Kabul's defense and interior ministries have factionalized the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), reduced the effectiveness of its officer corps, and produced friction among its rank-and-file. From the mouth of a veteran Afghan security official: "People in the army and police are fighting for their factions, not the country."

Despite these challenges, President Obama may decide to leave between 6,000 and 20,000 troops after 2014 to prevent militant expansion. Yet, if 100,000 allied troops could not stop that occurrence, then how 20,000 could remain questionable.

Moreover, what missions they will be tasked with will matter just as much as how many are deployed. After all, even though the coalition's kill and capture operations of mid- and low-level fighters weakened militant strongholds, the insurgency persists, reemerging under the presence of international military forces.

More broadly, what really matters is that any commitment to Afghanistan will not guarantee that terrorists from the region or beyond will not try to attack America. U.S. officials must remember – and keep telling the American people – that during the protracted nation-building occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans *still* experienced the Times Square bomber, the underwear bomber, the Ft. Hood shooter, and other failed and foiled terrorist plots and near misses. In short, a residual U.S. presence of any size in Afghanistan ensures neither success nor failure against terrorism.

By reducing expectations of an open-ended U.S. commitment, the president would be reinforcing Afghan ownership of the mission. Toward that end, building a functioning Afghan state and a Western-style military should not be the new condition on the ground dictating the pace of withdrawal. For now, the coalition keeps throwing money at the weak central government – and lots of it.

The United States agreed to fund the Afghan army until 2017, while international donors at the Tokyo conference last July pledged \$16 billion in civilian aid over the next four years. But unless the international community and the United States in particular monitor and enforce the conditions they placed on assistance, they will be doing that country no favors. Foreign aid has a weak correlation to fostering long-term sustainable development. Furthermore, as the last 11 years in Afghanistan have vividly demonstrated, pumping aid into an untrustworthy and perpetually unstable political structure can, “fuel corruption, distort labor and goods markets, undermine the host government's ability to exert control over resources, and contribute to insecurity,” as a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report detailed in 2011.

In this respect, the international community's indefinite commitments willfully ignore the many Afghans who still view their foreign-funded governing institutions as corrupt and illegitimate. Look no further than the near implosion of Kabul Bank, which handled salary payments of Afghan soldiers, police and teachers. Shareholders connected to Karzai and his vice president smuggled upwards of \$800 million on everything from lavish cars, real-estate in Dubai, and business ventures that won contracts at CIA-operated bases and sites.

Foreign policy planners must tell us how many more years, lives, and dollars are worth expending before Afghan elites are willing to pull their own weight. Going forward, U.S. officials and analysts must recognize that the less ambitious we are for them, the less responsible we are for their outcome.