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No More Troops for Afghanistan

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As public support for the war in Afghanistan hits an all-time low, Joint Chiefs Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen has endorsed an increase in U.S. forces there. But President Obama should strongly resist any calls to add more troops. The U.S. and NATO military presence of roughly 110,000 troops is more than enough to carry out the focused mission of training Afghan forces. Committing still more troops would only weaken the authority of Afghan leaders and undermine the U.S.'s ability to deal with security challenges elsewhere in the world.

The Senate hearings this week on Afghanistan are displaying the increased skepticism among many top lawmakers toward a war that is rapidly losing public support. At a Senate Armed Service Committee hearing, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) asked Mullen, "Do you understand you've got one more shot back home?" alluding to polls showing most Americans oppose the war and oppose sending more troops. "Do you understand that?"

Sadly, a common view among policymakers and defense officials is that if America pours in enough time and resources--possibly hundreds of thousands of troops for another 12 to 14 years--Washington could really turn Afghanistan around.

But while military leaders like Gen. Stanley McChrystal say a new strategy must be forged to "earn the support of the [Afghan] people," Washington does not even have the support of the American people. The U.S. does not have the patience, cultural knowledge or legitimacy to transform what is a deeply divided, poverty-stricken, tribal-based society into a self-sufficient, non-corrupt, and stable electoral democracy. And even if Americans did commit several hundred thousand troops and pursued decades of armed nation-building--in the middle of an economic downturn, no less--success would hardly be guaranteed, especially in a country notoriously suspicious of outsiders and largely devoid of central authority.

The U.S. and its allies must instead narrow their objectives. A long-term, large-scale presence is not necessary to disrupt al Qaeda, and going after the group does not require Washington to pacify the entire country. Denying a sanctuary to terrorists that seek to attack the U.S. can be done through aerial surveillance, retaining covert operatives for discrete operations against specific targets, and ongoing intelligence-sharing with countries in the region. Overall, remaining in Afghanistan is more likely to tarnish America's reputation and undermine U.S. security than would withdrawal.

Also this week, a group of "realist" scholars and activists (including some of my own Cato colleagues) have written President Obama urging him to reconsider America's commitment in Afghanistan. See the write up from Politico on the letter [here](#).

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