

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

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Fear and Loathing over Kabul

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On Sunday, Peter Baker of *The New York Times* reported that the Obama administration envisions ending America's combat mission in Afghanistan by 2014 ^[3]. The assumption is that by that date the coalition will have built an Afghan Army and police force that can defend their country. Upon closer inspection, however, the 2014 statement reflects a deeper incoherence in U.S. policy.

Even though I advocate a narrower, more focused mission ^[4], I am under no illusion that the attachment of an end date has made many Afghans reluctant to stick their neck out and cooperate with coalition forces for fear of militant reprisal. Amid an inevitable U.S. drawdown, the end date has also intensified the scramble for regional influence among surrounding states. The question is: Why attach an end date at all if the goal is to cultivate trust and forge cooperation with and among local actors?

This basic dysfunction was reflected in a statement made by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen. During the presidential transition period, Mullen reportedly told President Obama ^[5] that in truth there was no strategy for the Afghanistan war; regardless, Mullen said that with the proper resources America could succeed.

Succeed at what exactly? In our efforts to keep grasping for this nebulous notion of "success" we have allowed tactics to define and drive strategy. This is consistent with what Bob Woodward quotes ^[6] Army Gen. David Petraeus as saying:

"You have to recognize also that I don't think you win this war. I think you keep fighting. It's a little bit like Iraq, actually. . . . Yes, there has been enormous progress in Iraq. But there are still horrific attacks in Iraq, and you have to stay vigilant. You have to stay after it. This is the kind of fight we're in for the rest of

our lives and probably our kids' lives."

It is endless war for the sake of endless war: COIN-dinistas request more troops, more money, and more patience for the achievement of short-term goals that would not substantially improve our ability counter real threats to our vital interests.

A closely related problem is the mismatch between the coalition's overarching goal (the promotion of "a more capable, accountable, and effective government in Afghanistan" ^[7]) with the underlying acceptance that we lack the political tools necessary to achieve that goal. This disparity was revealed earlier this week when Afghan President Hamid Karzai, in an interview with the *Washington Post* ^[8], called for a reduction in the U.S. military presence and an end to night raids.

"The time has come to reduce military operations," Karzai told ^[9] the *Post*. "The time has come to reduce the presence of, you know, boots in Afghanistan . . . to reduce the intrusiveness into the daily Afghan life."

I, for one, am shocked—*shocked!*—that Afghans are upset with civilian casualties, and that the man running the Afghan government has the nerve to voice those frustrations publicly. Of course, Karzai has been saying this for years, so it's no wonder that he seems to be growing more desperate and frantic in his attacks.

As expected, Gen. Petraeus reportedly expressed ^[10] "astonishment and disappointment" at Karzai's remarks, and said that the president's attitude could make his position "untenable."

This latest imbroglia presents the perfect opportunity to step back and think about the extent to which U.S. and NATO leaders claim to want a strong local partner in Kabul, yet swat down Karzai whenever he asserts himself. I have little sympathy for Karzai himself, but this incoherence is glaring and deserves criticism.

More importantly, the coalition appears to be conflating strong governance with good governance in that many COIN/nation-building proponents insist that their strategy requires a legitimate host nation government. And yet, despite knowing full well that no such government exists, they remain firm on expanding the reach and scope of the current government in the face of reports that it is corrupt, abusive, and wholly inept.

As U.S. officials prepare for the NATO summit in Lisbon at the end of this week, they should think very hard about the strategic purgatory we are presently stuck in: the coalition's goals cannot be achieved with the resources currently applied, while the costs and risks needed to fully resource the mission outweigh the interests involved.

More by

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