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Marlou Innocent: U.S. should rethink Afghanistan

By MALOU INNOCENT
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In an operation 35 miles north of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad, U.S. Navy SEALs killed Saudi terrorist financier Osama bin Laden. This victory is a testament to the tireless efforts of our brave men and women in uniform. Their momentous achievement shows why when it comes to capturing and killing terrorists, targeted counterterrorism measures often prove more effective than expansive counterinsurgency campaigns.

With bin Laden's death, the United States closes a long chapter of its "War on Terror." Yet given America's large-scale, long-term, nation-building mission in Afghanistan, another chapter remains unfinished. The day after President Barack Obama announced bin Laden's death, NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, in a statement congratulating the United States for the operation against bin Laden, reiterated NATO's intent to continue with its nearly decade-long mission, with its ostensible goal of denying terrorists a safe haven in Afghanistan ever again.

Cartoon Gallery: 40 Osama bin Laden cartoons

NATO and the U.S. need to rethink the mission – for several reasons.

First, while some policymakers claim the war in Afghanistan is worth waging because terrorists flourish in failed states, this theory cannot account for the terrorists who thrive in states with the military power to resist external interference. That bin Laden was found in Pakistan highlights this fact. After all, even in the unlikely event that America and its allies did forge a stable Afghanistan, the fewer than 100 al-Qaida fighters currently believed to be in that country could simply relocate to other regions of the world. Moreover, as far as we know, the al-Qaida movement has cells not only in Pakistan, but also in Yemen, Somalia, and North Africa, and, at one point, Germany, Spain, and even Florida.

Second, remaining in Afghanistan presents a bigger threat to American interests than al-Qaida itself can pose. Amassing troops there has fed the perception of a foreign occupation of Muslim land, and spawned terrorist recruits in that country and elsewhere. Following the devastating terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, no one could have imagined that the United States would go from punishing al-Qaida and the Taliban to 10years later mandating the number of women who can serve in the Afghan parliament. Luckily, American security does not depend on us transforming what is a deeply divided and poverty-stricken society into a self-sufficient, non-corrupt, stable electoral democracy.

Third, Afghanistan's landlocked position in Central Asia will forever render it vulnerable to meddling from surrounding states. The clash of strategic interests not just between the United States and Pakistan, but also among other competing regional powers, shows, to quote America's new CIA director, General David Petraeus, that "while the security progress achieved over the past year is significant, it is also fragile and reversible." Under such conditions, Washington's periodic troop surges, increased development aid, and Predator drone strikes will fail to translate into anything more than limited gains on the ground.

Finally, the U.S. military is a professional and competent fighting force that is adept at bombing enemy command centers and destroying adversaries with disproportionate firepower. However, finding hidden killers such as terrorists often requires precision.

The most effective methods used to disrupt safe havens and round up suspected terrorists have been America's ongoing intelligence sharing with close allies and partners around the world, its monitoring of inaccessible regions with unmanned aerial vehicles, and its use of covert operatives against specific targets when absolutely necessary. Indeed, bin Laden's death, the greatest victory against al-Qaida so far, relied on counterterrorism, not on counterinsurgency. So too did the other successes scored against al-Qaida, such as the snatch-and-grab operations that netted Ramzi bin al Shibh in September 2002, and Khalid Sheik Mohammed in March 2003.

Bin Laden's death does not mean the end of al-Qaida. But the diminished al-Qaida threat was and always has been a manageable security problem, not an existential threat to America. Tragically, the enormous costs of ongoing operations in Afghanistan tend to dwarf the victories America routinely scores against al-Qaida elsewhere in the world.

Policymakers and prominent opinion leaders will continue to push for open-ended, nation-building missions and large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns against al-Qaida and other jihadists.

But like the medicine a doctor wrongly prescribes to a patient, don't blame the medicine, blame the doctor.

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