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Away From McChrystal and Back to the Basics

After the media firestorm ignited by Gen. Stanley McChrystal and his staff criticizing officials in the Obama administration, it's high time that Americans get back to the basics about Afghanistan.

Basic #1) Afghanistan does not constitute a vital interest to the United States.

Don't believe the hype about Afghanistan being critical to America's security. Al Qaeda poses a manageable security problem, not an existential threat. And whatever economic value the region holds, Stephen Walt, citing Jack Synder's *Myths of Empire*, does a great job disputing the contention that Afghanistan is a strategic asset because it is brimming with natural resources.

Basic #2) We Don't Need to Remain in Afghanistan to Protect Pakistan.

It is commonly held by the foreign policy elites that if Washington abandoned Afghanistan to its fate, emboldened jihadist groups could spill into neighboring Pakistan, fatally weaken its government, and seize its nuclear weapons.

This thinking is misguided.

Pakistan has an elaborate command and control system in place that complies with strict Western standards, and the country's warheads, detonators, and missiles are not stored fully-assembled, but are scattered and physically separated throughout the country. In short, the danger of militants seizing Pakistan's nuclear weapons in some Rambo-like scenario remains highly unlikely.

Moreover, if America's interests lie in ensuring the virus of anti-American radicalism does not infect the rest of the region, discontinuing policies that add more fuel to violent religious radicalism should be the first order of business. The dominant political force within Pakistan is not radical fundamentalist Islam, but rather a desire for a sound economy and basic security. But the foreign troop presence risks uniting otherwise disparate militant groups from both sides of the border against a hostile occupation of the region.

Basic #3) America and its International Partners Do Not Have to Create a Viable State in Afghanistan.

Western officials often say our strategy is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda. But in order to accomplish that goal, they insist we must create a functioning national state there. Why? Beltway orthodoxy tells us that because extremists emerge from failed states, America must forcibly stabilize, liberalize, and democratize Afghanistan.

This thinking is flawed for several reasons.

First, this widely-accepted policy prescription falsely conflates the goal of a successful territorial pacification of Afghanistan with the conceptually simpler task of monitoring and punishing al Qaeda. The blueprint for an effective counterterrorism approach is the initial U.S.-led invasion in 2001, when small Special Forces teams, working in conjunction with local militias, assembled quickly and struck effectively and cheaply at its enemies.

Second, as my Cato colleagues Chris Preble and Justin Logan point out, there's reason to doubt whether state failure or poor governance in itself poses a threat. Terrorists can move to governed spaces; rather than setting up in weak, ungoverned states, enemies can flourish in states that have formally recognized governments with the sovereignty to reject foreign interference.

Basic #4) A costly, open-ended military occupation gives Osama bin Laden and his ilk exactly what they want.

America's all-volunteer military force is fighting a protracted irregular war in the fifth poorest country in the world. We are inadvertently killing innocent civilians with little assurance that we can capture and kill more insurgents than our presence helps to recruit.

Additionally, where is the moral outrage that we are trying to strengthen and expand a government widely despised by its own population? Given the flagrant graft and corruption of many Afghan leaders, begging and pleading our Afghan puppet/political piñata Hamid Karzai to "govern better" and "tamp down corruption" is a Sisyphean task.

Basic #5) A protracted guerrilla war will weaken the United States militarily and economically.

As of only several months ago, the costs of staying in Afghanistan are jarring. The Pentagon is requesting an extra $33 billion to escalate combat operations, on top of the $65 billion already authorized for FY 2010. The Pentagon found that each additional 1,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan would cost about $1 billion a year.

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In the end, the tabloid drama between the White House and McChrystal should give way to some sober assessments about whether this mission is winnable, and whether it is even worth winning. We will have learned nothing from this clumsy and embarrassing episode if we do not step back and reevaluate what the war in Afghanistan hopes to achieve--and for whose benefit it is being waged.

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