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## Afghans Have to Want to Help Themselves

In news that was perhaps more important than the perfunctory "stay-the-course" rhetoric Obama paid lip service to during his State of the Union address, on Monday the *New York Times* reported that retired Army lieutenant general and U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl W. Eikenberry, expressed in writing his reservations about President Hamid Karzai. Eikenberry said that Karzai was "not an adequate strategic partner" and warned of the risk of increasing the Afghan government's dependency by deploying additional U.S. troops to the country ("Sending additional forces will delay the day when Afghans will take over, and make it difficult, if not impossible, to bring our people home on a reasonable timetable.")

For months, administration officials and the scholars and pundits that inform them have cherry-picked the longstanding tenets of counterinsurgency warfare. For example, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps' Counterinsurgency Field Manual deems the legitimacy of the host nation's government a critical component for combating an insurgency. The manual states repeatedly:

**"Long-term success in counterinsurgency depends on the people taking responsibility of their own affairs and consenting to the government's rule. Achieving this condition requires the government to eliminate as many causes of the insurgency as feasible." (p. 1-1)**

**"Victory is achieved when the populace consents to the government's legitimacy and stops actively and passively supporting the insurgency." (p. 1-3)**

**"The primary objective in COIN (counterinsurgency) operation is to foster development of effective governance by a legitimate government." (p. 1-21)**

**"Illegitimate actions are those involving the use of power without authority--whether committed by government officials, security forces, or counterinsurgents. Such actions include unjustified or excessive use of force, unlawful detention, torture, and punishment without trial." (p. 1-24)**

But let's be clear: there is no legitimate host government in Afghanistan. Graft and corruption are extremely pervasive, from President Hamid Karzai himself down to the lowliest traffic policeman. Furthermore, Afghan leaders (not Afghans themselves), including the president, finance minister, and even its ambassador to Washington, blame the United States

for allowing corruption in the Afghan government and deny responsibility for their government's own incompetence. It's been argued that the coalition must increase the Government of Afghanistan's ability to improve security, deliver basic services, and expand opportunity for economic development. But success in Afghanistan can only be achieved if their leaders want it themselves; there is very little Washington can do to compel them to undertake policies that we deem favorable.

As Brookings Institution Foreign Policy Fellow Vanda Felbab-Brown argued late last year, "[W]ithout a reasonable expectation that security will materialize, better governance will not germinate. If predatory, abusive, and corrupt elites calculate that greater stability is not in the making, they are going to operate on short-term horizons and simply speed up rapacious accumulation of profit and power." The United States is trying to improve security by deploying an extra 30,000 troops to the country; a paltry sum considering the COIN manual suggests 20 to 25 troops per 1,000 indigenous inhabitants, a ratio that would force foreign troop levels to 200,000 in southern Afghanistan alone and to well above 650,000 overall (particularly given insurgent inroads in the north).

More broadly, as I mention here in a recent bloggingheadsTV debate about Afghanistan with Anne Marlowe (around 49:57), since all counterinsurgency missions are context-specific, how many years will the United States have to recalibrate its strategy to accommodate corrupt regimes and reach the end-state it hopes to achieve? Moreover, as demonstrated by the failed Christmas Day bomber, the fact that terrorists can still make it into America throws into question the entire notion that we must amass hundreds of thousands of troops in Muslim-majority countries. If America must start a war wherever terrorist groups hide, then wars of armed nation building must commence in Somalia and Yemen, too. Most importantly, if America's national security strategy is not about protecting America but rather bringing countries out of poverty at the barrel of a gun, what about Bangladesh? Or Congo? Or Haiti? As I wrote last night while liveblogging, "Haitians might want to pray that al Qaeda swims over to Hispaniola, maybe then America and its allies can pave Haiti's roads, build Haiti's schools, and create a self-sufficient, noncorrupt, stable electoral democracy there, too (I won't hold my breath)."

It's become painfully obvious that the legitimacy of the Karzai government is not important to policymakers. Fine. But I wish the administration would come to realize that remaining in Afghanistan and creating a stable government there is not a precondition to keeping America safe.

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