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The Futility of Demanding Accountability From Karzai

In an unannounced visit to Afghanistan this past weekend, U.S. President Barack Obama urged Afghan authorities to rein in corruption and enforce the rule of law. "All of these things," said President Obama, "end up resulting in an Afghanistan that is more prosperous and more secure."

Given the flagrant graft and corruption of many Afghan leaders, it may sound intuitively appealing for the president to push for better governance in that country. However, that broadly accepted policy prescription falsely conflates the creation of a stable government in Afghanistan with protecting America's national security.

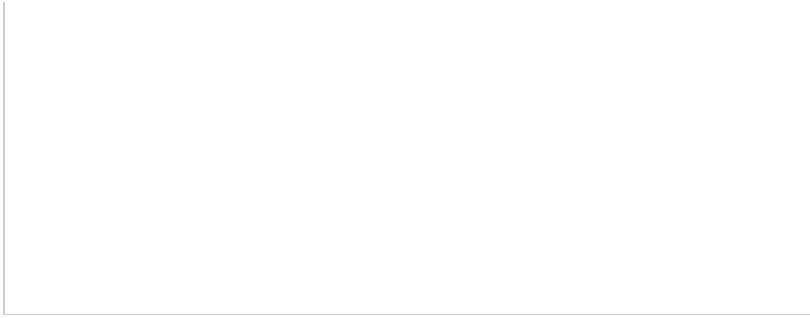
The uncomfortable truth is that without indefinite foreign protection, the Government of Afghanistan would probably fall to the Afghan Taliban. But Americans should not equate the fall of that regime with "losing" to al Qaeda. Violent, Islamist extremist groups indigenous to this region threaten the Afghan government, not the American government. Because these radical groups lack the ambition -- let alone the capacity -- to threaten the sovereignty or physical security of the United States, they do not merit the strategic obsession that they currently receive. Washington's continued fixation on groups that threaten Afghanistan, rather than America, presents a bigger threat to genuine American interests than those groups themselves can pose, especially since there is little assurance that 100,000 foreign troops can capture and kill more insurgents than their presence helps to recruit.

Rather than propping up a failed state, U.S. leaders should focus on countering the al Qaeda threat still clinging to life in this region. Technological advances over the past decade allow us to monitor places without having 100,000 boots on the ground. Furthermore, 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 "real" enemies.

In short, Americans should reject the misguided belief that terrorists can only flourish in failed states like Afghanistan. After all, India, a major U.S. ally far more stable than Afghanistan, is fighting several internal insurgencies. Likewise, the very al Qaeda terrorists responsible for 9/11 not only found sanctuary in poverty-stricken Afghanistan, but also in politically free and economically prosperous countries like Germany, Spain, and the United States. Policymakers in Washington must stop conflating the punishment of al Qaeda with the creation of stable societies, particularly when ensuring the survival of an illegitimate foreign government distracts from the conceptually simpler task of finding and killing terrorists.

This post originally appeared in The Daily Caller on 3/29/10.

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