

11-22-2009 15:32

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Limits of US Power in Afghanistan

By Doug Bandow

U.S. President Barack Obama continues to consider a major military escalation in Afghanistan. Instead, the president should rethink Washington's objective. The goal should be to minimize international terrorism, not build an Afghan state.

Conflict in Afghanistan has raged for eight years, yet "victory" looks ever more distant. White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel declared that the goal is "a credible government and a legitimate process." Alas, neither exists.



In March, Obama added 21,000 combat troops to the 84,000 U.S. and allied personnel already stationed in Afghanistan. Now Gen. Stanley McChrystal is pushing for at least 40,000, and as many as 80,000 more.

Even the latter would not guarantee success. Under traditional counterinsurgency doctrine, Afghanistan, with 33 million people, many of them living in remote villages amidst rugged terrain, warrants 660,000 allied personnel. The allied objective is critical.

The Western forces quickly displaced al-Qaida and ousted the Taliban government, which gave the organization refuge. U.S. National Security Adviser James Jones estimated fewer than 100 al-Qaida members are now operating in Afghanistan, and they have "no bases, no ability to launch attacks on either us or our allies."

Far harder will be creating "a credible Afghan partner for this process that can provide the security and the type of services that the Afghan people need," in Emanuel's words. Afghanistan is the "graveyard of empires" in which outside powers never have successfully imposed their will.

Eight years of social engineering has failed.

The allies are left protecting, in the words of conservative columnist Ralph Peters, "an Afghan government the people despise."

Afghanistan's importance primarily derives from its impact on nuclear-armed Pakistan next door. However, an endless, escalating conflict is more likely than a Taliban victory to destabilize Pakistan.

Washington is left with only bad options. Matthew Hoh, who recently quit the State Department, observed that no "military force has ever been tasked with such a complex, opaque and Sisyphean mission as the U.S. military has received in Afghanistan."

Even if more troops were better deployed, the odds of reasonable success in reasonable time at reasonable cost are long.

The U.S. and its allies should begin drawing down their forces. The outcome might be Taliban conquest and rule, but equally likely is divided governance. In either case, the conflict would no longer be inflamed by outside intervention.

The Economist hyperbolically fears that "defeat for the West in Afghanistan would embolden its opponents not just in Pakistan, but all around the world, leaving it more open to attacks."

However, jihadists are most likely to attack Westerners when Westerners are killing Muslims. Moreover, escalation, if followed by additional years of conflict and ultimate defeat, would more grievously harm America's reputation.

The most serious argument against withdrawal is that al-Qaida would gain additional "safe havens." Special envoy Richard Holbrooke contended that preventing this is "the only justification for what we're doing."

Yet, al-Qaida has not moved into territory governed by the Taliban. Anti-terrorism expert Marc Sageman observed, "There is no reason for al-Qaida to return to Afghanistan. It seems safer in Pakistan at the moment." The defuse jihadist movement even has organized terrorist plots from Europe.

The Obama administration should adjust its ends. It should focus on al-Qaida rather than the Taliban.

In contrast, it is not necessary to build a functional Afghan state. The allies should tolerate any group willing to cooperate in preventing terrorist attacks.

Washington should attempt to split the Afghan insurgency. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted, "Not every Taliban is an extremist ally."

Explained Arsalan Rahmani, a member of the old Taliban government: "Some are fighting to go to paradise, but among the Taliban leaders most want peace." Also subject to purchase or lease may be opportunistic warlords such as Gulbaddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani.

An essential aspect of this strategy, however, is withdrawing allied troops.

Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis, who served in both Afghanistan and Iraq, observed, "Many experts in and from Afghanistan warn that our presence over the past eight years has already hardened a meaningful percentage of the population into viewing the United States as an army of occupation which should be opposed and resisted."

In 2002, Obama warned against fighting a war "without a clear rationale," and that an invasion of Iraq would yield "a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, and with unintended consequences." That is happening in Afghanistan.

Getting out won't be easy. The time and manner of reducing the allied military presence should reflect changing circumstances. But withdrawal should be the ultimate objective.

Even with the finest military on earth, the U.S. government cannot do everything. In Afghanistan, Washington policymakers should finally acknowledge the limits of U.S. power.

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