THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Five Reasons to Withdraw from Afghanistan

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Recent events in Afghanistan have raised serious doubts about staying the course, despite testimony this week from General John Allen, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, that we are making "real" and "sustainable" progress. Here are five reasons why Americans should rethink the war and support an expedient withdrawal.

1. Safe Havens Are Myths

In 2009, President Obama declared that our strategy in Afghanistan had a clear mission: "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda and its extremist allies." What was less clear was why bringing a modern army to Afghanistan would stop al-Qaeda from attacking America. Would-be terrorists have reduced their dependence on "base camps" and "physical havens." They can plan, organize and train from virtually anywhere. The 2008 Mumbai attacks, for example, were planned in the same Hamburg mosque where 9/11 was plotted. Countering al-Qaeda requires discrete operations, intelligence sharing and surgical strikes when necessary. Unfortunately, U.S. officials remain hostage to the outdated notion that a specific territory matters. Many assume incorrectly

that the defeat of al-Qaeda depends upon a prolonged troop presence in Afghanistan and elsewhere. But such a presence is neither necessary nor sustainable.

2. Creating a Self-sufficient Afghan State Is Not an Exit Strategy

Remaining in Afghanistan to the point when locals can stand on their own is the back door to an indefinite presence. A detailed report released last August by the independent, bipartisan Commission on Wartime Contracting found that the U.S. government contracted for dozens of clinics, barracks, hospitals and other facilities that exceeded Afghan funding capabilities. In essence, the coalition spent tens of billions of dollars to build physical infrastructure that goes beyond the Afghan government's financial and technical capacity to sustain. The American people have grown increasingly skeptical that a viable and independent Afghan state can be built at a reasonable price. Their cynicism is justified.

3. Al-Qaeda Is Not the Taliban

We're often told that failure to create a minimally functioning government in Afghanistan will turn that country into a base for the Taliban and hence, al-Qaeda. That argument is specious. It assumes that the Taliban would again host al-Qaeda—the very organization whose protection led to the Taliban's overthrow—and that terrorists won't attack America if there's a Western-backed client regime in Kabul. U.S. leaders have lumped al-Qaeda (a loose jihadist network responsible for 9/11) with the Taliban (an indigenous Pashtun-dominated movement with no global mission). As a result, the United States remains at war with the Taliban, the Haqqani network, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami Group and other indigenous militants who pose no threat to America's sovereignty or physical existence. Meanwhile, America's suppression of al-Qaeda is not seen as the victory it is.

4. Current Policies Destabilize Pakistan

A year before leaving her post in Pakistan, former U.S. ambassador to Islamabad Anne Patterson warned her superiors that while the "unilateral targeting of al-Qaeda operatives and assets" was important to countering terrorism, it also "risks destabilizing the Pakistani state, alienating both the civilian government and the military leadership, and provoking a broader governance crisis without finally achieving the goal." Drone strikes, ground raids and other covert activities in Pakistan have proven to be a double-edged sword: helping decimate al-Qaeda's senior leadership but also provoking terrorism on American soil, increasing the Pakistani people's hatred of America—and thus their passive acceptance of anti-American militants—and adding to the dangerous destabilization of a volatile nuclear-armed state. As a 2011 report published by the *Middle East Policy Council* warned, "Rather than calming the region through the precise elimination of terrorist leaders, however, the accelerating counterterror program has compounded violence and instability." Americans shouldn't forget Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani immigrant who in 2010 pleaded guilty to trying to detonate an S.U.V. packed with explosives in Manhattan's Times Square. Among Shahzad's motives was the killing of Muslims by the U.S.-led drone campaign.

5. Remaining In Afghanistan Weakens America

Many prominent opinion leaders argue that withdrawing from Afghanistan will boost jihadism globally and make America look weak. Perhaps, but propagating these fears has been more useful in selling a bad foreign policy to the American public. Whether America "cuts and runs" or stays and bleeds, it's win-win for America's enemies. After all, one of bin Laden's primary goals was to damage the U.S. economy. From a strategic and economic

perspective, no tangible gains could outweigh the costs of America maintaining an indefinite presence in Afghanistan, especially when its landlocked position will render whatever gains we do achieve vulnerable to sabotage from surrounding states. If the 9/11 wars have taught us anything, it's that weak local enemies who enjoy home-field advantage can nullify our overwhelming military superiority. The lesson to draw is not that America should never give up after having intervened, but that we should avoid staying course no matter the cost.