

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Unanswered Questions on Afghanistan

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Secretary Panetta's announcement that the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan will end as early as mid-2013 is a positive development. But it is long overdue and still leaves too many questions unanswered. After more than ten years of war in Afghanistan, the administration should follow through on its commitment to end combat operations and withdraw all troops by 2014.

Continuing to narrow our objectives will make this war winnable.

Politically, this makes perfect sense for the Obama administration. It is a shot across the bow of his political opponents and those wishing for an indefinite combat mission in Afghanistan. Secretary Panetta's announcement allows the administration to get on the side of voters who want to draw down in Afghanistan. By opposing any drawdown, his critics side with the much smaller segment of the American people who still support the nation-building mission. President Obama is in a position similar to the debate over Iraq in his 2008 presidential campaign. He argued in 2008 that he would end a grinding war he inherited. The president can claim victory (and vindication) in Iraq and argue that if you liked the first act, you'll love the second. He will end another grinding war he inherited—and conveniently gloss over the fact that he sent more troops to Afghanistan than President Bush ever did.

Of course, these developments are neither new nor a sure thing. Despite the media attention given to this announcement, it was somewhat predictable. Panetta acknowledged that this was always part of the plan behind the scenes. Buried in the coverage of Panetta's statement are multiple qualifiers. He admitted that no decision has been made on the number of troops that will leave in 2013. The secretary offered no details on what this transition from combat operations would look like. Indeed, the line between an "advise-and-assist" mission and combat operations is a sketchy one. A spokesman clarified that U.S. forces could still be involved in combat operations in 2014. In the end, our policy has not changed. It is still unclear how many U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan at the end of 2013. But to the extent that Panetta's recent statement reaffirms the administration will adhere to the timeline of withdrawal, it is an encouraging sign. It signals to the Afghans that they must take responsibility for their own security, and it provides an incentive for them to continue to put themselves in harm's way and take the initiative.

Let's hope that this is indeed a confirmation of the administration's commitment to a withdrawal. The United States should have scaled down to a limited, targeted counterterrorism mission many years ago. A large-scale, nation-building mission has never been necessary to protect the vital interests of the United States and hunt down the few remaining terrorists in Afghanistan that aim to strike the homeland.

The strategic misconceptions that guide our current mission in the country are overwrought, lack evidence and are based on worst-case scenarios. We should continue to transition to a counterterrorism mission that utilizes intelligence, special operations forces and our considerable technological advantages, such as UAV's. And we must continue to encourage the Afghan people to take responsibility for their security and their nation.