THE HILL

THE HILL'S Congress Blog
Where lawmakers come to blog

The Big Question: What does U.S. success in Afghanistan look like?

By Mary Ann Dreas and Tony Romm - 10/08/09 01:27 PM ET

Some of the nation's top political commentators, legislators and intellectuals offer insight into the biggest question burning up the blogosphere today:

What would success in Afghanistan look like, and how long will it take?

Dr. James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, said:

> From the beginning, we failed to address the real prospect that there would be and could be no "success" in Afghanistan. Punishing al Qaida and getting bin Laden, were worthwhile, but unrealized, goals. But the Bush Administration was reckless in their approach to the war, and was, then, either delusional or deceitful in their early declarations of victory (remember the "Forward March of Freedom"?). In the name of "success", they dug a deep hole.

> uring the campaign, President Obama was right to say "we were fighting the wrong war" , hadn't gotten bin Laden, and correct to note that the conflict had spread across the border into Pakistan, with al Qaida being transformed into a regional menace.

> All this said, what we need to do first is rid ourselves of the notion of "success", focusing instead on precise and necessary objectives (which, granted, have now become more difficult), and the ways to avoid failure or getting ground-down in a long term illusory quest of victory. We can't afford to continue to delude ourselves that we will achieve success. The public won't tolerate it, and "it" isn't possible.

> Some are demanding immediate action. But before we simply add troops, embrace a failed and corrupt government, of questionable legitimacy, further aggravate regional tensions ignoring the consequences of all this on Pakistan, and dig deeper into the illusory hole of "success", we should listen to Senator John Kerry's sage advice when he urges a more cautious approach, a deliberative decision-making process, and a national debate.

Rob Richie, executive director of FairVote, said:

> Success in Afghanistan must include a better functioning democracy. Well-grounded allegations of fraud in the recent elections provide openings for the Taliban and undercut Afghans' faith in U.S. allies and, more broadly, the western model of representative democracy. Big changes to Afghanistan's civil society can't happen overnight, but Americans should do more to stand up for honest elections and fair representation. This includes both basic vote-counting rules and a structure of government and electoral rules that promote power-sharing and transparency.

The contrast with Iraq's democracy is striking. Iraq has abandoned a strong president, with a de facto parliamentary system. It uses proportional representation voting systems that in the upcoming elections seem to be doing all the more to encourage the parties to be more secular as they try to reach beyond their religious bases of support in efforts to earn more votes in more regions of the country. That's not to say that Iraq will be a success story and Afghanistan will not -- but more attention should be paid to government structure and electoral rules and process.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, said:

We need to "define success down" in Afghanistan. That means abandoning any notion of transforming ethnically fractured, pre-industrial Afghanistan into a modern, cohesive nation state. It also means reversing the drift in Washington's strategy over the past eight years that has gradually made the Taliban (a parochial Pashtun insurgent movement) rather than al Qaeda America's primary enemy in Afghanistan. A more modest and realistic strategy means even abandoning the goal of a definitive victory over al-Qaeda itself.

Instead, we need to treat the terrorist threat that al-Qaeda poses as a chronic, but manageable, security problem. Foreign policy, like domestic politics, is the art of the possible. Containing and weakening al Qaeda may be possible, but sustaining a large-scale, long-term occupation of Afghanistan and creating a modern, democratic country is not.

Instead of embracing General McChrystal's proposal for a substantial increase in the U.S. military presence–or even adopting a "McChrystal-Light" strategy-- the Obama administration should begin a phased withdrawal of troops over the next 18 months, retaining only a small military footprint relying on special forces personnel. Otherwise, America will be entangled for years--or decades--in pursuit of unattainable goals. *(For more, read Escaping the "Graveyard of Empires": A Strategy to Exit Afghanistan.)*

Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, said:

Put me down as not talking about Afghanistan yet. I didn't do enough review before I came to a conclusion on Iraq back in 2002, and I don't want to make that mistake twice. Obviously the heart of the decision in al Qaeda and sanctuaries for terrorism, but that doesn't answer the question--what do you need to do to achieve the goal?

Rep. Stephen Lynch (D-Mass.) said:

Success in Afghanistan would be stabilization. The conditions there are so poor and we have so far to go. I believe 9 percent of the country has electricity, and the literacy rate for women is about the same. The literacy rate among men is only a shade better. Obviously we're working from a very low bar. I think you can measure success in a number of ways. Over 50 percent of women in that country have less than full citizenship. We should focus on democratization, empowering the people themselves, on their terms. And I don't think that's just the United States' job; it's an international responsibility.

Rep. Bill Delahunt (D-Mass.) said:

I don't know how long it will take. I think success will be focused on the elimination of al Qaeda and supporting the kind of society that does not give comfort to extremists who contemplate attacks on Americans.

Source:
http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/62251-the-big-question-oct-8-what-does-success-

in-afghanistan-look-like