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Doug Bandow: America's patience for Afghanistan war has run out

By: Doug Bandow
OpEd Contributor
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Afghanistan originally looked like the good war. Consolidating power in a reasonably democratic government in Kabul was never going to be easy, but the Bush administration tossed away the best chance of doing so by prematurely shifting military units to Iraq. The Obama administration now is attempting the geopolitical equivalent of shutting the barn doors after the horses have fled.

The situation is a mess. The Karzai government is illegitimate, corrupt and incompetent. Taliban forces and attacks are increasing. Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, admits that Afghanistan is "deteriorating."

Yet the president is sending an additional 30,000 American troops. He argued that "our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda" and refused to "set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means or our interests."

President Obama appears to have done precisely the latter. Even after the buildup, the U.S. and its allies will have only a few thousand more personnel than did Russia during its failed occupation. And Western forces will be barely one-fifth the numbers contemplated by U.S. anti-insurgency doctrine.

The only sensible argument for staying is, as the president put it, "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda." But that already has been done.

Al Qaeda has been reduced largely to symbolic importance, as most terrorist threats now emanate from localized jihadist cells scattered about the globe. National security adviser Jim Jones estimated that there are just 100 al Qaeda operatives now in Afghanistan.

Even if the Taliban returned to power, they might not welcome back the group whose activities triggered American intervention. Nor would al Qaeda necessarily want to come back, because a Taliban government could not shield terrorists from American retaliation.

Pakistan offers a better refuge, and there are plenty of other failed states -- Yemen comes to mind -- in which terrorists could locate.

Far more important than Afghanistan is nuclear-armed Pakistan. However, continued fighting in the former is more likely to destabilize the latter than increased Taliban influence.

The cost in lives and money -- as well as the liberty inevitably lost in a more militarized society -- can be justified only when the American people have something fundamentally at stake in the conflict. Their interest in determining the form of Afghan government or liberties enjoyed by the Afghan people is not worth war.

Imagine if President George W. Bush had announced that his administration was going to sacrifice several thousand American lives, trigger a conflict that would kill tens or hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, spend \$2 trillion or more, strengthen Iran's geopolitical position, damage America's international reputation, and reduce U.S. military readiness in order to organize an Iraqi election.

Likely popular resistance offers one of the strongest arguments for drawing down U.S. forces and shifting from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism. Even if bolstering the Karzai government is feasible, doing so will be a costly and lengthy process, one for which popular support already has largely dissipated.


State Sen. Barack Obama warned against "a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost and with unintended consequences" in Iraq. Unfortunately, that looks like his policy for Afghanistan.

Going into Afghanistan was necessary initially, but staying there today is not. With the Democratic president and Republican neoconservatives alike supporting the war, only the American people can force the conflict to a close.

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