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Created Nov 2 2009 - 5:40pm

Remarks for RAND conference, October 29, 2009

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In October 2001, a small number of U.S. personnel, working in tandem with local Afghan leaders, entered Afghanistan with a clear aim: to degrade al Qaeda's ability to carry out another 9/11-style attack, and to punish the Taliban regime that harbored al Qaeda. Over the past eight years, that mission has shifted to a much broader set of objectives including:

- o Promoting capable, accountable, and effective governance in Kabul
- o Providing aid and other forms of economic assistance; and
- o Cracking down on the cultivation of illegal narcotics

The extent to which the mission had shifted away from its original punitive intent was affirmed in September when General McChrystal explained that a new strategy must be forged to "earn the support of the [Afghan] people...regardless of how many militants are killed or captured."

But such an undertaking, amounting to a large-scale social-engineering project, is unwarranted. The costs in blood and treasure that we would have to incur -- in addition to what we have already paid -- are not outweighed by the benefits, even if one accepts the most optimistic estimates as to the likelihood of success.

If the Obama administration goes along with Gen. Stanley McChrystal's request for more troops, and therefore chooses to spend additional money on this mission, the administration is saying, in effect, that an expanded troop presence will do more to prevent a repeat of 9/11 than if the money had been spent on countless other missions and programs ostensibly directed to the same purpose.

Count me a skeptic. There is considerable evidence that a large-scale and open-ended troop presence is counterproductive to fighting terrorism. Meanwhile, there have been a number of highly effective counterterrorism programs that cost far, far less.

Advocates of a far larger troop presence allege that there simply are no alternatives to full-scale, population centric counterinsurgency. They contend that the counterterrorism approach has been tried and failed. And they give even less credence to the notion that a reasonably effective strategy could be crafted for a fraction of the cost of their approach.

As an aside, I find it inconceivable that the most prosperous country on the planet, a country that boasts a state-of-the-art military, and whose annual military R&D budget is regularly greater than the entire defense budgets of all but a handful of states, would ever have no alternatives.

But in this case, there is one. We can continue to pursue our core objectives in Afghanistan without an enormous military presence on the ground. The process begins by revisiting the mission, and refining our objectives.

The essential question concerning our path forward is not about whether the war in Afghanistan is winnable – anything is winnable so long as you retain the ability to define the difference between victory and defeat, and so long as you are able to mobilize at will the resources needed to sustain the mission until that victory is achieved.

More important is the question of whether the mission is essential to U.S. national security interests – a necessary component of a broader strategy to degrade al Qaeda's capacity for carrying out another 9/11 – or has it become an interest in itself, we must win the war because it is the war we are in.

Judging from most of the contemporary commentary, it has become the latter. Thus have our war aims expanded to the point where they are serving ends unrelated to our core security objectives.

The United States must instead narrow its focus. We don't need a long-term, large-scale presence to disrupt al Qaeda. Indeed, that limited aim has largely been achieved.

If you doubt that the current mission in Afghanistan is no longer chiefly about degrading al Qaeda's ability to carry out future operations against the United States, consider the following: Al Qaeda isn't in Afghanistan.

- In an interview earlier this month, national security adviser James Jones noted that the "maximum estimate is less than 100 operating in [Afghanistan]." This tiny number of individuals has "no bases, no ability to launch attacks on either us or our allies."
- In recent testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, terrorism expert Marc Sageman agreed. He noted al Qaeda's difficulty in recruiting new talent, and in maintaining quality within its upper echelons. "Protection of [the] Western homeland," Sageman explained, "involves an effective strategy of containment of the threat in the Afghan Pakistan area until it disappears for internal reasons....Containing those who travel to Pakistan for terrorist training is a counter-terrorism problem and is [a] much easier problem to solve than transforming an adjacent nation through a national counter-insurgency strategy."
- He concluded that "The proposed counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan is at present irrelevant to the goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating al Qaeda."

Sageman can obviously be counted as a skeptic of the current counter-insurgency strategy in Afghanistan. But even the defenders of a wider COIN mission admit that it is essentially irrelevant to fighting al Qaeda.

- Stephen Biddle, writing in *The American Interest*, concludes that preventing Afghanistan from ever again becoming "a haven for terrorism against the United States" is "the

weakest argument for waging the kind of war we are now waging.”

- He goes on: “It is still important to deny al-Qaeda sanctuary on the Afghan side of the Durand Line. But the intrinsic importance of doing so is no greater than that of denying sanctuary in many other potential havens—and probably smaller than many. We clearly cannot afford to wage protracted warfare with multiple brigades of American ground forces simply to deny al-Qaeda access to every possible safe haven. We would run out of brigades long before bin Laden ran out of prospective sanctuaries.”

- But the most trenchant and pointed critique of our current approach that I’ve seen in recent weeks came from Simon Jenkins, who opined earlier this week in the Guardian, “The excuse that we are preventing another 9/11 is ludicrously thin. That event, whose plotting and training were in Europe and America, will cause the US to spend what Congress puts at a staggering \$1.3 trillion in wars and related security by 2019. And still no one has arrested Bin Laden. It must be the most extravagant punitive expedition to the Asian mainland since Agamemnon set off for Troy.”

In short, what we have seen over the past eight years is a classic case of mission creep.

The United States cannot transform what is a deeply divided, poverty stricken, tribal-based society into a self-sufficient, cohesive and stable electoral democracy. And even if Americans did commit several hundred thousand troops – as the COIN doctrine’s own guidelines stipulate – success would hardly be guaranteed, especially in a country notoriously suspicious of outsiders and largely devoid of central authority.

Of course, it’s unreasonable to guarantee success in times of war. Planning will always fall short of our expectations; no one can reliably predict the future. But we should be especially wary of ambitious state building efforts. Most such projects fail. The prospects in Afghanistan are worse. As the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations stated in an August 2009 report, “Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan is not a reconstruction project—it is a construction project, starting almost from scratch in a country that will probably remain poverty-stricken no matter how much the U.S. and the international community accomplish in the coming years.”

Washington’s hope for nation building and counterinsurgency, particularly as they are being applied toward Afghanistan, is not so much misguided as it is misplaced. Containing al Qaeda and disrupting its ability to carry out future terrorist attacks does not require a massive troop presence on the ground. Committing still more U.S. personnel to Afghanistan undermines the already weak authority of Afghan leaders, interferes with our ability to deal with other security challenges, and pulls us deeper into a bloody and protracted guerilla war with no end in sight.

So, what is the alternative? Containment, as the title of this panel implies. That would entail a far smaller U.S. military presence, pursuing a much narrower set of objectives. It starts with a different mindset about how we interact with Afghans.

In a Washington Post op ed published earlier this year, Arthur Keller, a former CIA case officer in Pakistan, reminds us of legendary CIA operator Bill Lair’s lessons from Laos.

“Keep your footprint small....Don't ever let the locals think mighty America will fight their battles or solve all their problems for them; focus on getting them ready to fix their own problems.”

Keller concludes: “This is not a war we can win ourselves; the Afghans are going to have to win it by fighting to retake their own country from both Taliban thugs and corrupt government officials.”

“[D]oing too much for a weak ally can be just as bad as doing too little.”

I agree. For the time being, the advocates of an open-ended and very large-scale troop presence in Afghanistan, have the upper hand in the debate.

An expanded mission fails a simple cost/benefit test. Even if we were to make a decades-long commitment to creating a state in Afghanistan, success would be far from certain. As with all foreign policies, this enormous effort must be weighed against the opportunity costs. Money, troops, and other resources would be poured into Afghanistan at the expense of other national priorities, both foreign and domestic.

There will be no shortage of calls for more troops to be sent to Afghanistan. Indeed, some of the leading advocates for the disastrous war in Iraq – some of whom have spoken here today – routinely declare that any talk of narrowing our objectives anywhere is synonymous with defeat.

Such claims demonstrate a profound lack of understanding of Americans' tolerance for an open-ended mission with ill-defined goals. More importantly, a disdain for a focused strategy that balances ends, ways and means, betrays an inability to think strategically about the range of challenges facing the United States today. After having already spent eight years in Afghanistan, committing still more troops there would only weaken our ability to deal with security challenges elsewhere in the world.

Accordingly, we should be looking for ways to extricate ourselves from Afghanistan, not excuses to dig a deeper hole.

Afghanistan

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Source URL (retrieved on Nov 9 2009 - 2:13pm): <http://acdalliance.org/content/chris-preble-afghanistan>