

OUR VIEW: Change strategy in Afghanistan

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As usual, Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward is more than coy about who leaked a copy of the 66-page report prepared by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, head of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, with recommendations for what the U.S. needs to do to achieve success in Afghanistan. Whatever the provenance of the leak, however, it should be helpful to us as decisions are made that could mean long-term military and civilian commitments in a country with little history of effective governance.

McChrystal's assessment is remarkable and commendable for its frankness. The sections that have made headlines — that the situation is deteriorating, that without further resources and a radically new strategy there is serious risk of “an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible” — suggest how well McChrystal understands the challenges.

However, his strategy recommendations would involve an open-ended commitment of U.S. money and lives that we doubt the American people are willing to endorse. This reluctance is understandable, since that kind of commitment has only a marginal relationship to core U.S. interests.

McChrystal says that “Our strategy cannot be focused on seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces; our objective must be the population.”

This is classic counter-insurgency — gaining “hearts and minds” and thereby neutralizing an insurgency. Unfortunately, it seldom succeeds, and takes at least 10-12 years and much higher troop levels than the 68,000 now in Afghanistan.

Most European countries are increasingly impatient with the Afghan incursion and several have already announced intentions to withdraw their troops.

From an abstract humanitarian perspective, it might be nice if Afghanistan had an effective central government that operated democratically, respected human rights, and wasn't suffused with corruption — although most Afghans, who have never had a strong, effective central government, don't really yearn for one.

The core U.S. interest in the region, however, is not democracy in Afghanistan. It is to keep pressure on al-Qaida and ensure that any Afghan government does not welcome al-Qaida back to establish bases from which to conduct terrorist activities against the West.

Al-Qaida and the Taliban, the major player in the current insurgency, are both repellent to most decent people. However, while al-Qaida has international ambitions, the best evidence is that the Taliban are a homegrown Afghan movement with no ambitions outside Afghanistan (except to use the ungovernable northwest region of Pakistan along the Afghan border).

Most Afghans don't want to see the Taliban rule again. Even in the worst-case scenario, however, if the Taliban were to acquire power, it could be told in no uncertain terms that if it allowed al-Qaida to re-establish bases in Afghanistan the U.S. and its allies would take them out.

As Malou Innocent, a policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute who took an extensive fact-finding trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan last year, noted recently, U.S. officials could remind them that after 9/11 a few CIA and Special Forces people, combined with already-organized Afghan forces, took out the then-existing Taliban government in a matter of weeks.

So. Is the U.S. ready to commit to an open-ended nation-building mission in one of the countries least-congenial to it? Or is our interest to make sure al-Qaida is weakened and unable to mount ambitious attacks in Europe or the United States?

If our mission is the latter, the best course would be to reduce our military commitment in Afghanistan and rely on improved intelligence and special-forces activities against al-Qaida itself. Afghanistan may be badly ruled, but as long as it doesn't pose a direct threat to the U.S., it is not our business to reform it, nor is it obvious that even with a sustained and expensive effort we could do so.