

Q&A: Can Obama Win in Afghanistan?

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Afghanistan help by Eric Allie.

President Obama has become quite the hawk when it comes to the war in Afghanistan. Mr. Obama has approved a surge of 21,000 troops that will bring U.S. military forces there to 68,000. And recently he confidently promised that the U.S. will "disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan." We wish the president lots of luck in achieving victory in a fiercely independent, stubbornly anarchic region that has dashed the hopes of Alexander the Great and the British and Soviet empires. Meanwhile, we decided to seek the wisdom of Ted Galen Carpenter. Carpenter, a vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including his latest, "Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America." I talked to him about the president's plans for Afghanistan on Thursday, April 2, by phone from his office in Washington.

Q: What is your knee-jerk reaction to President Obama's move to beef up our forces in Afghanistan? And now the top general there has asked for 10,000 additional troops for next year.

A: Obama's proposal was not as bad as I thought it would be. It was more limited in terms of military buildup and a healthy wariness about ambitious nation building. But the military's request suggests that there is probably a tension between the White House and the Pentagon regarding the extent of the military buildup.

Q: Is any escalation of our military forces in Afghanistan sufficient to accomplish the president's goals?

A: It depends exactly what the goal is. If the goal is to disrupt al-Qaida, to keep al-Qaida off balance and on the ropes, then, yes, I think we probably can prevail with a reasonably sized military deployment. If on the other hand our goal is a total defeat of al-Qaida, plus a total defeat of al-Qaida's Taliban allies, plus trying to remake Afghanistan into a modern secular liberal society, then no amount of military force is going to be sufficient.

Q: What is the U.S. strategy for Afghanistan and where do you see fault in it?

A: The strategy remains very vague, although Obama tried to sharpen it a little in terms of disrupting and defeating al-Qaida. That is the correct focus. I think it was very revealing that he did not say "disrupt and defeat the Taliban." That's holding out an olive branch to at least the more pragmatic Taliban elements.

What we're seeing is somewhat of a repetition of the David Petraeus strategy that he used in Iraq in separating a lot of indigenous Iraqi Sunnis from "Al-Qaida in Iraq." I believe that the U.S. is now trying to execute a similar maneuver in Afghanistan. The problem is the factors are somewhat different in Afghanistan than they were in Iraq and the prospects are not as good to achieve that kind of a breakthrough.

Q: What's your sound-bite synopsis of the military and political situation in Afghanistan?

A: The situation is precarious at the moment. Given the complexity of Afghanistan's political environment, that's not surprising. The Taliban and al-Qaida have regained strength over the past three or four years. However, I don't see that the Afghan government and their allies – the various regional power brokers – are on the brink of defeat. This is still a struggle that is very much still up in the air.

Q: From my understanding of your thinking, you don't believe we should intervene militarily overseas unless it's truly in America's security interests and those instances are pretty rare. Is that roughly true?

A: That's a pretty accurate description. As I've said from the beginning, Afghanistan was one of those exceptions, given the fact that the attacks on 9/11 originated from al-Qaida in Afghanistan protected by the Taliban.

Q: So how do we handle Afghanistan?

A: I would say we should have very limited, realistic objectives. I think we can disrupt and keep al-Qaida off balance so that it cannot plan and execute massive attacks against the United States or other targets. But nation building is an utterly idiotic mission in Afghanistan. I think we have drifted into that over the last six or seven years. I hope that we reverse course and limit our objective to goals that have a reasonable prospect of being achieved.

Q: An example of a reasonable objective would be what?

A: First of all, the key objective is to significantly weaken al-Qaida. That has to be the core objective. Beyond that, I don't think we should try to micromanage Afghanistan's political or social or economic affairs. We don't have to have Afghanistan as a nice, liberal democratic society. I don't think it's going to become that any time in the foreseeable future in any case, no matter how long we stay. But what we need is for Afghanistan not to be a safe haven for al-Qaida in the way it was before 9/11.

Q: It seems that Afghanistan is always a sideshow to what is going on in Pakistan. Is Pakistan really the big problem in that region?

A: The two are very intimately related. It's very difficult to address our security objectives in Afghanistan without dealing with some of the problems across the border in Pakistan. Clearly, we're concerned about stability in Pakistan, considering the fact the country does have several dozen nuclear weapons. But I don't see the Pakistani government on the brink of falling or Pakistan becoming a failed state any time soon. Those are exaggerated. They are not entirely beyond the realm of

possibility. But I also think they are being exploited by skillful political operatives who want to get a lot more aid out of the United States.

Q: Are you an optimist or pessimist about how the Afghanistan situation and our presence there will evolve?

A: I remain at least somewhat of a pessimist. Afghanistan did not get the name "The Graveyard of Empires" for nothing. The U.S. is trying to accomplish a vague and at least implicitly rather ambitious agenda yet. I think we're still going to have to scale back that agenda even more than the Obama administration has done to this point before we can have a realistic hope of achieving success.

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