July 28, 2010

This is the print preview: Back to normal view »

Leon T. Hadar

Journalist and foreign affairs analyst

Posted: July 28, 2010 04:15 PM

What Happens If U.S. Troops Leave Afghanistan? Not the End of the World As We Know It

As the members of War Party and its political-media echo chamber continue recycling their spin on WeakiLeaks-Afghanistan - hey-there-is-no-big-news-here-like-we-didn't-know--that-let's-stay-the-course - Washington - as opposed to the Rest of the Country - remains chained to the conventional wisdom (CW) that, well, even if things in Afghanistan are not working as planned and may be heading toward F-U Territory, the alternative - getting out of Hindu-Kush - would spell U-S D-E-F-E-A-T, helicopters on the American embassy's roof, the Barbarians at the Gate, the Fall of the Roman Empire, the End of the World as We Know it. Even the less hysterical types among us warn of the possible loss of American "credibility" around the world, of the potential threat to the Afghani secularists, women, religious minorities, and of the realistic scenario under which the failed state of Afghanistan degenerates into a total anarchy and is engulfed in a bloody civil war between ethnic and tribal groups that could draw in foreign powers and ignite a regional (nuclear?) war between India and Pakistan.

The *Financial Times'* foreign affairs analyst, Gideon Rachman - more incisive and much less pompous than you-know-who - responds to this scary CW that seems to suggest that we will be there -- yesterday, today, tomorrow -- "To prevent Afghanistan becoming a failed state and a haven for terrorists," by asking, "If we are in Afghanistan, why are we not also in Somalia, Yemen or Pakistan?" Rachman point out that these countries (one could add Kashmir and some of our beloved Central Asia's "Stans" to the list) have become centers of operations for mishmash of radical Islamist terrorist groups -- al Qaeda franchises or "al Qaeda @" -- that (try) to impose their control over some people and some territory and (try) to export their brand of terrorism to other countries in the geographical neighborhood.

Here is Rachman's main point: The U.S. and its allies have been dealing with this threat (notice I did not put quotation mark here) in Somalia (and in Yemen and Pakistan) through a combination of whatcha call "over the horizon" counterterrorism strategy or the "Somali Model," to use Rachman's

term. "Monitor potential terrorist activity in Somalia from a distance, using a mixture of satellite and human intelligence. And, where possible and necessary, intervene with targeted military strikes," he recommends.

The arm-chair strategists in the *Washington Post* do not like the idea, arguing that "over the horizon" strategy does nothing "to change the conditions under which al-Qaeda finds refuge and recruits." They continue to support whatcha call "counterinsurgency strategy" or COIN, by "providing security for the civilian population, economic reconstruction and the brokering of political accords -- in other words, nation-building." That is as true in Somalia as it is in Iraq, the happy warrior and nation builders in the *Post* suggest.

But the COIN strategy that General Petraeus and his Australian mate and their disciples in Washington think tanks which the U.S. failed to implement in Vietnam will certainly not work in Afghanistan. Indeed, the notion that the U.S. has the power and the will - not to mention the interest - to engage in a long and costly process of building a nation-state in Afghanistan --- rebuilding, remaking, restructuring, reconstructing, and reforming this failed state and its mishmash of ethnic, religious, and tribal groups - the Pashtun and Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara, and the Aimak and the Turkmen and the Baloch people, its underdeveloped economy, nonexistent military, and "civil society" -- is nothing more than a fantasy. In reality, it could create - it is creating! -- a series of "blowbacks" that could end-up igniting more and not less anti-American terrorism. And let's face it: What Petraeus has achieved in Iraq is a temporary cease-fire between the Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds and the many other religious sects and tribes, that may - like in maybe - provide for a "decent interval" during which the U.S. could pull-out its troops from Mesopotamia. If anything, the American invasion or Iraq has interrupted a very bloody and horrific "nation building" process by Saddam Hussein and resulted in a civil war that will probably continue in one form or another for many years to come.

My guess is that a U.S. military disengagement would probably ignite a similar kind of civil war in Afghanistan as the largest ethnic group, the Pashtun fight with the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras (the three groups that dominated the victorious Northern Alliance) as outside regional powers led by Pakistan, India, Russia and China providing support for their clients.

Contrary to the dire warnings of members of Washington's War Party such a process could actually help create some level of stability in Afghanistan as Pakistan and India help establish sphere of influence there: Pakistan will maintain its influence in the so-called Pashtun-belt in the south where a the Taliban could emerge as the major local player, while India exert its own influence in the north of Afghanistan.

In fact, the expectation for U.S. military pull-out from Iraq has helped produce similar incentives for regional powers like Turkey, Iran and the Sunni Arab states to establish a certain balance of power in that country, with Turkey establishing friendly ties with the Kurds in the North while cooperating with Iran to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state. Similarly, Iran and the Saudis have a common interest in averting a full-blown military confrontation between the Shiites and the Sunnis. There is no reason why India and Pakistan would not cooperate in controlling their clients in Afghanistan in order to avoid a regional military conflagration.

In any case, outside global powers, including the U.S. are constrained in their ability to shape the political realities in Afghanistan, and they have no moral obligation to do that. That does not mean that Washington should not use its diplomatic and economic power - and in some cases, limited military assistance -- to help those players that share its interests and values. And it certainly should continue applying an effective counter-terrorism strategy to deal with the concrete threat of al-Qaeda@

A I have written two years ago, the Obama Administration needed to modify its "belief about the moral benefit and policy utility of nation-building" which amounted to nothing more than mumbo-jumbo rhetoric. It should "abandon these fantasies and instead embrace a realist policy of working with regional powers to secure the limited but actual U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the rest of South and Central Asia--weakening the influence of radical Islam; damaging the infrastructure of terrorist groups; preventing unstable regimes and terrorist organizations from gaining access to weapons of mass destruction." You do not have to engage in the grandiose project of nation-building in order to achieve these limited goals.

Books & More From Leon T. Hadar

Follow Leon T. Hadar on Twitter: www.twitter.com/leonhadar