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Why Afghanistan is not Vietnam

By Joshua Gross - 09/21/09 06:03 PM ET

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Foreign policy — tragically — is not immune to fads, even when national interests are at stake. A new Washington cottage industry is coalescing around the bogus premise that a quick U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is inevitable and desirable. The rising popularity of the withdrawal option is symptomatic of our national media's dangerous obsession with quick fixes. The formula is simple: cherry-pick one voice from the left (Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis.) and one voice from the right (George Will), formulate flawed Vietnam analogies, and add ominous references to the "graveyard of empires." Friday's CATO Institute Capitol Hill briefing, "The Case for Withdrawal from Afghanistan," is the latest expression of this myopic herd behavior.

Viewed from afar, Afghanistan does resemble Vietnam in some ways: less-than-legitimate governments, impoverished populations, inhospitable terrain and grueling asymmetric warfare, all complemented by rising impatience among the American electorate. But Afghanistan is not Vietnam. Technology has dramatically changed the way that wars are fought and enhanced American capabilities; today's volunteer military is learning from its mistakes much more quickly than Vietnam's draft military thanks to an evolving counter-insurgency doctrine; most importantly, the Taliban has no unifying nationalist vision and lacks popular support. The Vietnam analogy is often employed with great effect to disguise a single-minded isolationist ideology.



The current war effort is not beyond redemption, but much hard work remains. Early setbacks in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated that the U.S. was unprepared for the post-conflict phase of military operations. While the anticipated civilian surge will greatly enhance the overall counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan, some experts estimate that it will

take at least five to 10 years for the U.S.'s under-resourced civilian agencies to begin taking over significant responsibilities from the armed forces. Fifteen thousand USAID officers served in Vietnam and over 5,000 U.S. officials spoke Vietnamese.

Today, only 18 Foreign Service officers can speak Pashto.

Although the "war on terror" has been renamed "overseas contingency operations," the threat posed by terrorists operating in the ungoverned region along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border remains very real. The tribal areas of Pakistan are sanctuaries for violent extremists fighting to destabilize Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as al Qaeda leadership planning the next

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attacks on U.S. soil. Pakistan's strategy of strategic depth in Afghanistan has sustained a conveniently ungoverned (but not ungovernable) space in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Countless attacks on American targets have been hatched from training camps in western Pakistan that the Pakistani military, out of design or weakness, has not shut down. The 2008 DNI Annual Threat Assessment concluded that the next al Qaeda attack on the U.S. will emanate from this region. In April, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton warned that Pakistan's deteriorating security "poses a mortal threat to the security and safety of our country and the world."

America is only as powerful as her pledge is meaningful. If we are unable to deliver what we promise, our ability as a nation to shape the preferences of others will decline, our credibility will be hurt and our allies will lose faith in our leadership. President Obama should begin managing expectations immediately, while simultaneously outlining a new grand strategy for the region predicated on Pakistani-Indian rapprochement.

In the past, India and Pakistan have rebuffed American mediation. Today, boots on the ground demonstrate our commitment to stability in the region. Unless the Pakistani and Indian governments believe we will be in their backyard for the long haul, they will spurn the prospect of a return to the negotiating table. Talk of withdrawal will encourage regional powers to hedge their bets against sustained U.S. presence and encourage radicalized elements in the Pakistani security sector to reemerge and consolidate their power.

The U.S. can be the bridge between these traditional foes, enabling both parties to save face when they make concessions. Sixty thousand U.S. troops in Afghanistan provide substantial leverage against intelligence and military elites in Pakistan playing a double game, preaching peace in public while encouraging militancy in private. U.S. pressure on Pakistan will reassure skeptical Indian politicians that we will not be biased in favor of our erstwhile Cold War ally.

Rebuilding Afghanistan will only succeed as a multilateral effort. Withdrawal would confirm our trans-Atlantic allies' worst fears about American capriciousness just as we are reasserting our global leadership. NATO and UNAMA would inherit the mess we leave behind.

Nonetheless, civil-military planners should begin contemplating an honorable exit strategy in partnership with the U.N. Ostensibly, as the U.S. military footprint diminishes, the U.N. will be asked to shoulder more of the stabilization responsibilities. Policymakers should revisit the tumultuous transition from UNITAF to UNOSOM II, where an expansive mandate, unrealistic expectations, and mistrust undermined international efforts to stabilize Somalia. Until a comprehensive transition plan is complete, talk of withdrawal is premature, if not negligent.

Gross is a student at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He was formerly the director of media relations for the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington and a consultant for the Project on National Security Reform.

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