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Recognizing the Limits of American Power in Afghanistan

What's Your Reaction?

Candidate Barack Obama was widely seen as running on a peace platform. More recently President Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace for supposedly offering a new international approach. Yet he is considering a major military escalation in Afghanistan.

Instead, the president should rethink Washington's objective. The conflict has become his war. He should not ask, is Afghanistan winnable? Rather, the right question is what should the U.S. attempt to achieve? The goal should be to advance American security, not build an Afghan state.

The president need not rush his decision. Hawkish demagogues who entrapped the U.S. in an unnecessary war in Iraq hope to do the same in Afghanistan. For instance, Rep. Cynthia Lummis (R-Wyoming) claimed: "the lack of decisiveness about how to best proceed is emboldening our enemies and endangering our troops and friends." The worst policy, however, would be to mimic the foolish decisiveness of President George W. Bush.

Afghanistan was President Bush's "good war," in which Washington ousted the ruling Taliban for hosting al-Qaeda. But he quickly lost interest in Afghanistan, shifting Washington's attention and resources to Iraq. Conflict in Afghanistan has raged for eight years--longer than the U.S. spent fighting World Wars I and II combined--consuming nearly 900 U.S. and 600 allied lives, as well as \$220 billion. The Afghan people, too, have suffered greatly.

Yet "victory" looks ever more distant. Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned that the situation in Afghanistan is "deteriorating." The government barely functions; drug money pervades the otherwise moribund economy. The number of estimated insurgents, Taliban attacks, and allied casualties all are rising. Barely a third of the territory can be said to be under the central government's (very loose) control, and even large urban areas are no longer safe. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's supporters engaged in ostentatious and widespread electoral fraud.

Indeed, the election imbroglio highlights the administration's challenge. White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel declared: "The result, for us and for the president, is whether, in fact, there's a credible government and a legitimate process." But that question has been answered--in the negative. The initial vote was marred by widespread irregularities; the fraudulently reelected president accepted a run-off only because the foreign military powers keeping him in power demanded one; no one imagines President Karzai losing even if Abdullah Abdullah reverses his decision to boycott the poll. A forced coalition/national unity government would offer little more legitimacy.

President Obama termed the war one of "necessity" and in March added 21,000 combat troops to the 47,000 Americans already stationed in Afghanistan. (Another 37,000 allied, largely NATO, forces are on station, though often where they are not needed.) Now the president's hand-picked commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, is pushing for upwards of 80,000 more personnel, with 40,000 apparently the "minimum" acceptable in his view.

The administration is worried about the political implications of escalation and is considering a compromise--adding some troops, but fewer than desired by Gen. McChrystal. However, pursuing expansive objectives without providing the necessary resources would be the worst policy. Commented *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson: "This game's been going on for eight years. It's time to raise or fold."

But raising would not guarantee success. The allies initially deployed 60,000 personnel in Bosnia, a much smaller territory in which conflict had ceased. At its maximum Russia had 118,000 troops in Afghanistan, which proved to be too few. Even an extra 80,000 troops--which the U.S. does not have handy to deploy in Afghanistan--would not be enough. Under traditional counterinsurgency doctrine, Afghanistan, with 33 million people, many of them living in remote villages amidst rugged terrain, warrants 660,000 allied personnel. Nor is NATO reinforcement a realistic option. President Obama, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, and Gen. McChrystal all have pushed for more assistance, but garnered few commitments and even fewer boots on the ground. Europeans have far less stomach for continuing the war than do Americans.

The critical issue is Washington's objective. The U.S. long ago achieved its goal of displacing and weakening al-Qaeda (despite the failure to capture or kill Osama bin Laden) and ousting the Taliban government which gave the organization refuge. That success persists despite recent Taliban gains. National Security Adviser James Jones estimated fewer than 100 al-Qaeda members are operating in Afghanistan, and said they have "no bases, no ability to launch attacks on either us or our allies."

Ousting the Taliban was simple compared to creating "an effective and representative government," in the words of Marin Strmecki, formerly at the Pentagon, or "a national representative government that is able to govern, defend, and sustain itself," according to four scholars at the Center for American Progress, or "a credible Afghan partner for this process that can provide the security and the type of services that the Afghan people need," in Rahm Emanuel's words. Such a partner doesn't currently exist and is no where close to existing.

Everyone uses the old adage that Afghanistan is the "graveyard of empires," but outside powers never have had much success in imposing their will on the Afghan people. Nation-building is difficult enough: only in Germany and Japan, with ordered societies and democratic traditions, has the U.S. had unambiguous success. Third World states have proved largely impervious to Western attentions.

Afghanistan is no different. Afghanistan "worked" during the mid-20th century under a monarchy which understood the limits of its power. The regime respected the poor, traditional, autonomous tribal-based society which it purportedly ruled. And, most important, there were no foreign military occupiers.

Social engineering by Washington would be difficult in the best of circumstances. Afghanistan's challenges are daunting. Observed the *Economist* magazine: "The country's mountains and deserts are forbidding; its tribal make-up bewildering; and, after three decades of war, its communities broken, poor and ignorant. Well-meant actions often have unintended effects: fighting can create more insurgents than it kills; foreigners are blamed for attacks that hurt Afghan civilians; and schemes to win people over can deepen antagonism."

Afghanistan hosts 20 ethnic groups. Even the Pashtuns are divided into 50 tribes. This is not a society traditionally welcoming to outsiders, let alone foreigners. Afghanistan has become the world's largest opium producer. Finally, Afghan society has been badly deformed by three decades of war.

After eight years, Washington has not created the answer in Kabul. Matthew Hoh, a former Marine Corps officer who recently resigned from the State Department, explained: "Like the Soviets, we continue to secure and bolster a failing state, while encouraging an ideology and system of government unknown and unwanted by its people." Ralph Peters, a columnist who backed the Iraq war, criticized protecting "an Afghan government the people despise."

The inadequacies of the Karzai regime are manifest and multiple. The International Crisis Group pointed to "a highly centralized constitutional order in which the legislature has been denied the tools to check an overbearing executive, and a neglected judiciary, which contributes to the climate of impunity and corruption fuelling the insurgency." Malalai Joya, vilified by fundamentalists for daring to run for parliament and promote women's rights, complained: "Your governments have replaced the fundamentalist rule of the Taliban with another fundamentalist

regime of warlords."

Then there is the recent flagrant election fraud, which, wrote Hoh, "will call into question worldwide our government's military, economic and diplomatic support for an invalid and illegitimate Afghan government." Karzai's allies claim that the Afghan president has learned from the experience, but what has he learned? If he can get away with rampant fraud, whether or not a second poll is held, he likely will become even less tractable. U.S. escalation will be seen as support for the existing regime, not for the sort of idealized system Washington claims to support.

No intrinsic strategic importance justifies attempting to construct a genuine Afghan state. Boston University's Andrew Bacevich explained: "No serious person thinks that Afghanistan--remote, impoverished, barely qualifying as a nation-state--seriously matters to the United States." Afghanistan's importance primarily derives from its impact on nuclear-armed Pakistan, whose largely ungoverned border territories provide a haven for both Taliban forces and what remains of al-Qaeda.

Blogger Paul Mirengoff contended that "Ceding Afghanistan to [America's main] enemy would have serious adverse implications for Pakistan." The *Washington Post* worried: "success by the [Taliban] movement in toppling the government of either country would be a catastrophe for the interests of the United States and major allies such as India." Others predict a veritable regional disaster if the U.S. withdraws.

However, a semi-stable, semi-workable Afghan state doesn't necessarily work to Pakistan's advantage. First, how would it affect Islamabad's most serious security concern--the regional balance with India? Pakistan strongly supported the Taliban regime pre-9/11 for a reason. Second, Afghans enjoying the benefits of peace might not welcome jihadists and terrorists, encouraging the latter to remain in Pakistan's largely autonomous border provinces.

Most important, Pakistan seems more likely to be destabilized by an endless, escalating conflict than a Taliban advance. Islamabad's vulnerabilities are obvious, with a weak civilian government facing a complex mix of poverty, instability, insurgency, and terrorism.

Unfortunately, the war in neighboring Afghanistan exacerbates all of these problems. Argued Hoh: "Our presence in Afghanistan has only increased destabilization and insurgency in Pakistan." First, the war has pushed Afghan insurgents across the border. Second, cooperation with unpopular U.S. policy has reinforced the Zardari government's appearance as an American toady. Ever-rising American demands further undercut Pakistani sovereignty and increase public hostility.

From Pakistan's perspective, limiting the war on almost any terms would be better than prosecuting it for years, even to "victory," whatever that would mean. In fact, the least likely outcome is a takeover by widely unpopular Pakistani militants. The Pakistan military is the nation's strongest institution; while the army might not be able to rule alone, it can prevent any other force from ruling.

Indeed, Bennett Ramberg made the important point: "Pakistan, Iran and the former Soviet republics to the north have demonstrated a brutal capacity to suppress political violence to ensure survival. This suggests that even were Afghanistan to become a terrorist haven, the neighborhood can adapt and resist." The results might not be pretty, but the region would not descend into chaos. In contrast, warned Bacevich: "To risk the stability of that nuclear-armed state in the vain hope of salvaging Afghanistan would be a terrible mistake."

Washington is left with only bad options. One is to continue trying to "fix" Afghanistan. Gen. Stanley McChrystal argued: "A strategy that does not leave Afghanistan in a stable position is probably a short-sighted strategy." Moreover, said Gen. McChrystal, American strategy must "earn the support of the people," which will win the war "regardless of how many militants are killed or captured."

Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations even suggested that "Poor governance is an argument for, not against, a troop surge. Only by sending more personnel, military and civilian, can President Obama improve the Afghan government's performance, reverse the Taliban's gains and prevent al-Qaeda's allies from regaining the ground they lost after 9/11." In short, failing to create a functional state after eight years of war means Washington should double down, pushing more lives and money into the growing pot.

America's well-disciplined and well-trained forces can do much, but not everything. Hoh observed that no "military force has ever been tasked with such a complex, opaque and Sisyphean mission as the U.S. military has received in Afghanistan." Even if better deployed in more heavily populated areas, the odds of reasonable success in reasonable time at reasonable cost seem long at best.

The point is not that the majority of Afghans love the Taliban. But many dislike the Karzai government, local warlords, and/or allied forces. The costs of "winning" such a complicated game almost certainly would outweigh the benefits of even the most optimistic projections. As Peters bluntly states, "the hearts and minds of the Afghans not only can't be won, but aren't worth winning." More likely than victory would be years of war, persistent insurgent activity, thousands more American casualties, hundreds of billions of dollars more outlays, persistent regional instability, and ultimate U.S. withdrawal.

What are the alternatives? The status quo offers little hope of reversing the Taliban's gains. Concentrating allied troops in the cities might offer greater urban security but would concede most of the country to the insurgency. Accelerating training and equipping of the Afghan army and police would yield positive results only if the resulting forces proved to be competent and honest, as well as competently and honestly led.

The better policy would be for Washington to begin drawing down its combat forces. The outcome might be Taliban conquest and rule, but equally likely is continuing conflict and divided governance amongst competing political factions, ethnic groups, and tribes. The resulting patchwork would be tragic, but the fighting would no longer be inflamed by outside intervention.

Would adverse consequences extend beyond the region? The *Economist* hyperbolically fears that "defeat for the West in Afghanistan would embolden its opponents not just in Pakistan, but all around the world, leaving it more open to attacks." However, jihadists are most likely to attack Westerners when their grievances are ongoing. Groups based in Amman, London, Madrid, and Riyadh as well as America are more likely to act if the American government is killing more rather than fewer Muslims in Afghanistan.

Moreover, escalation, followed by additional years of conflict and then ultimate defeat would multiply the harm to America's reputation. The Soviet Union made this mistake. Author Victor Sebestyen reviewed the minutes of meetings between Politburo and military officials and reported: "The Soviets saw withdrawal as potentially fatal to their prestige in the cold war, so they became mired deeper and deeper in their failed occupation." Even reformist Mikhail Gorbachev dithered out of fear of the impact on Moscow's image before finally withdrawing Soviet forces in 1989.

The most serious argument against withdrawal is that al-Qaeda would gain additional "safe havens." Fred Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute argued that "Afghanistan is not now a sanctuary for al-Qaeda, but it would likely become one again if we abandoned it." Richard Holbrooke, the Obama administration's special envoy to South Asia, contended: "without any shadow of a doubt, al-Qaeda would move back into Afghanistan, set up a larger presence, recruit more people and pursue its objectives against the United States even more aggressively." Preventing this is "the only justification for what we're doing," he insisted.

Yet there is no evidence that al-Qaeda has moved into territory currently governed by the Taliban. Even Taliban-controlled Afghanistan would not be a genuine safe haven. Noted Stephen Walt of the Kennedy School: "The Taliban will not be able to protect [bin Laden] from U.S. commandos, cruise missiles and armed drones. He and his henchmen will always have to stay in hiding, which is why even an outright Taliban victory will not enhance their position very much."

Indeed, anti-terrorism expert Marc Sageman observed in recent congressional testimony: "there is no reason for al-Qaeda to return to Afghanistan. It seems safer in Pakistan at the moment." Other options include other failed or semi-failed states, such as Somalia and Yemen. The defuse jihadist movement which has organized most of the terrorist plots since 9/11 has found adequate safe havens even in Europe.

No wonder Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations admitted, while calling for continuing "a war effort that is costly, risky and worth waging--but only barely so," that preventing al-Qaeda from moving back into Afghanistan was "the weakest argument for waging the kind of war we are now waging." The U.S. doesn't have the resources necessary to wage war everywhere terrorists might conceivably seek a safe haven and need not do so in any case.

The administration should adjust its policy ends. Washington's principal objective should be protecting U.S. security. The *Washington Post's* David Ignatius railed against adopting "a more selfish counterterrorism strategy that drops the rebuilding part and seeks to assassinate America's enemies." But the U.S. government's overriding obligation is to protect U.S. citizens, and that means focusing on al-Qaeda rather than the Taliban, forestalling and disrupting terrorist operations against America. Doing so requires sharing intelligence widely among affected nations, squeezing terrorist funding networks, utilizing Special Forces on the ground, employing predator and air strikes--judiciously, given the tragic risk of civilian casualties, which both raises

moral issues and fuels anti-American sentiment--and cooperating with various Afghan forces and the Pakistani government.

In contrast, it is not necessary to build a functional state in Kabul allied with the U.S. Noted Sageman: "The proposed counter-insurgency strategy in Afghanistan is at present irrelevant to the goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating al-Qaeda, which is located in Pakistan. None of the plots in the West has any connection to any Afghan insurgent group, labeled under the umbrella name 'Afghan Taliban.'" In Afghanistan Washington should tolerate any regime or group, or combination of regimes or groups, willing to cooperate in preventing terrorist attacks.

Obviously, policymakers disagree on the likelihood of success of such a political strategy. One unnamed anti-terrorism official told the *Washington Post* that the prospects of political reconciliation are "dim and grim." Other analysts contend that only major battlefield victories would encourage Taliban forces to surrender.

Yet history suggests that accommodation is possible and certainly worth pursuing. After all, the Karzai government has made deals with warlords and narcotics producers alike. Washington once worked, reluctantly to be sure, with the Taliban regime to combat drug production. There are indications that the Taliban was angered by al-Qaeda's 9/11 assault on the U.S. Moreover, a number of Taliban commanders defected in the early years after American intervention.

Thus, Washington should attempt to split the Afghan insurgency. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once equated al-Qaeda and the Taliban, but more recently admitted: "Not every Taliban is an extremist ally." In fact, the Taliban mixes hard-core militants and disaffected residents. Arsalan Rahmani, once Islamic affairs minister in the Taliban government and now a member of the Afghan parliament, explained: "Some are fighting to go to paradise, but among the Taliban leaders most want peace. Afghanistan is their homeland and they want peace here."

The distinction is widely recognized. *Newsweek's* Fareed Zakaria wrote: "It is unclear how many Taliban fighters believe in a global jihadist ideology, but most U.S. commanders with whom I've spoken feel that the number is less than 30 percent. The other 70 percent are driven by money, gangland peer pressure or opposition to Karzai." Similarly, the *Boston Globe* quoted an American intelligence official who contended that only ten percent of insurgents were Taliban ideologues, while "Ninety percent is a tribal, localized insurgency."

Even Gen. McChrystal advocated going "pretty high up" to give even Taliban commanders "the opportunity to come in." He added that Pashtuns "have always been willing to change positions, change sides. I don't think much of the Taliban are ideologically driven; I think they are practically driven. I'm not sure they wouldn't flip to our side."

Washington will need to display both knowledge and nuance, admittedly too often in short supply, to exploit Taliban differences. However, being out of power apparently has left the Taliban even less well-disposed to bin Laden & Co. Explained John Mueller of Ohio State University: "There are reports that Omar's group has made clear its rupture with al-Qaeda in talks with Saudi Arabia"

Thus, the Taliban may well focus on its own interests. Mullah Mutawakkil, once a minister in the Taliban government, believes a deal is possible: remove bounties on commanders, release insurgent prisoners held at Bagram air base, and accept Taliban rule in Afghanistan's southern provinces in return for a commitment not to allow use of Taliban-controlled territory in attacks on the West.

This would not be a radical policy, since Washington already has ceded certain areas to warlord control. Insurgent leaders know well that denial is less costly than control: Washington could launch targeted strikes against any al-Qaeda operations and oust any regime, Taliban or other, which allied itself with terrorists. This approach also would demonstrate to the Muslim world that the U.S. is targeting terrorists, not Islamic governments. In contrast, warns Mutawakkil: "If the Taliban fight on and finally became Afghanistan's government with the help of al-Qaeda, it would then be very difficult to separate them."

Currently joined with the Taliban are opportunistic warlords such as Gulbaddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani. Washington should appeal to differences among uneasy allies and offer to buy off--or lease--the more venal opposition.

An essential aspect of this strategy, however, is withdrawing allied troops, since many Afghan fighters are determined to resist any foreign occupiers. A continuing occupation, no matter how well-intentioned from our perspective, will generate "more casualties, irritation and recruitment for the Taliban," in the words of Nicholas Kristof.

In fact, the longer more U.S. forces remain, the harder more insurgents will resist. In 2007, for instance, 27 often feuding groups coalesced in Pakistan in response to U.S. airstrikes. In Afghanistan the population has not turned on the Taliban the way Iraqis turned on the al-Qaeda. Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis, who served in both Afghanistan and Iraq, advocated a U.S. withdrawal over the next 18 months: "Many experts in and from Afghanistan warn that our presence over the past eight years has already hardened a meaningful percentage of the population into viewing the United States as an army of occupation which should be opposed and resisted."

Unfortunately, there are limits to Washington's ability to ameliorate this result. Argued Hugh Gusterson, of George Mason University: "The Pentagon will try to minimize the insult through cultural sensitivity training and new doctrines that emphasize befriending the locals, but they will fail because it's in the very nature of counterinsurgency that occupying forces must be intrusive to be effective. And when you have thousands of foreign troops being shot at, accidents and atrocities happen. The more such troops you have, the more accidents and atrocities you get."

There remains the emotional case for escalation. Army Sgt. Teresa Coble complained to the *Washington Times*: "We would not be honoring the lives of the troops who died if we left here without finishing our mission." But what is the mission? One should mourn those whose lives were sacrificed by their government for any policy which failed. However, al-Qaeda has been largely defanged. The failure to create an Afghan nation is one of policy, not personnel. It would not honor American servicemen and women to needlessly toss away even more lives to continue this failed policy.

It would be especially foolish to embark upon a campaign of escalation if it is not sustainable over the long-term. And escalation is not. After nearly eight years of war, the American people are losing faith--not in the necessity of killing or capturing terrorists, but in the dream of remaking Afghanistan. The latest CNN poll indicates that six of ten Americans oppose sending more troops to Afghanistan. Nearly half want to reduce manpower levels or even withdraw all troops. A majority also believes that Afghanistan has turned into another Vietnam.

Advocates of years more of costly war for dubious gain argue that the public *should* support their policy, but that is irrelevant. The president must base U.S. policy on what the public likely *will* support. Else his strategy will be doomed from the start.

In 2002 Barack Obama warned against fighting a war "without a clear rationale and without strong international support," and that an invasion of Iraq would yield: "a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, and with unintended consequences." That is happening in Afghanistan. In fact, one could imagine bin Laden hoping to ensnare the U.S. in a no-win war in Afghanistan. Seth Jones and Martin Libicki of the Rand Corporation noted that "combat operations in Muslim societies" are "likely to increase terrorist recruitment." Indeed, parody has become truth. "Reported" the *Onion*: "According to sources at the Pentagon, American quagmire-building efforts continued apace in Afghanistan this week, as the geographically rugged, politically unstable region remained ungovernable, death tolls continued to rise, and the grim military campaign persisted as hopelessly as ever."

Of course, the desire of many Washington policymakers to improve the lives of Afghans is genuine. Most Afghans want peace and many Afghans desire American aid to better their land. Given enough resources and time, courageous and dedicated U.S. personnel could conceivably succeed in remaking Afghanistan. But the chances are slim while the cost in lives and treasure inevitably would be high--too high.

Getting out of Afghanistan won't be as easy as getting in. The administration should develop a strategy to steadily reduce rather than increase America's military presence. Combat forces should be fully withdrawn. The U.S. should focus on counter-terrorism. The time and manner of getting out should reflect potentially changing circumstances. But withdrawal should be Washington's ultimate objective.

An independent America was born of a rugged determination by common folk to govern themselves. It should not surprise modern Americans that many Afghans feel the same way. Despite the persistent delusion in Washington that the rest of world desperately desires to become America's next attempt at social engineering, most Afghans are not waiting for U.S. advisers, diplomats, and soldiers to show them a better way. To the contrary, many are ready to fight to follow their own way.

Their determination presents the president with a momentous decision. The administration should narrow the Afghan mission. Washington's objective should be disrupting al-Qaeda wherever located, whether Afghanistan, Pakistan, or elsewhere. On occasion that will warrant military action, but more often other tools will be required. Even with the finest military on earth the U.S. government cannot do everything. Reconsidering American strategy in Afghanistan is an important way for Washington policymakers to acknowledge the limits of U.S. power.

Changing American priorities in this way would be a giant step by President Obama towards actually earning a Nobel award bestowed more out of future hope than past achievement.

