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# Obama's (In)Decision on Afghanistan

According to CBS News, President Barack Obama will send most, if not all, of the 40,000 additional troops that General Stanley McChrystal requested and reportedly plans to keep those troops in Afghanistan for the long-term.

If the CBS report turns out to be true -- the White House has backed away, and other news outlets are leaving the story alone for the moment -- the president's decision is disappointing, but expected. Last month, the administration ruled out the notion of a near-term U.S. exit from Afghanistan, arguing that the Taliban and al Qaeda would perceive an early pullout as a victory over the United States. But if avoiding a perception of weakness is the rationale that the administration is operating under then we have already lost by allowing our enemies to dictate the terms of the war.

Gen. McChrystal's ambitious strategy hopes to integrate U.S. troops into the Afghan population. These additional troops might reduce violence in the short- to medium-term. But this strategy rests on the presumption that Afghans in heavily contested areas want the protection of foreign troops. The reality might be very different; western forces might instead be perceived as a magnet for violence.

McChrystal's strategy also presumes that an additional 40,000 troops will be enough. But proponents of an ambitious counterinsurgency strategy need to come clean on the total bill that would be required. For a country the size of Afghanistan, with roughly 31 million people, the Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency doctrine advises between 620,000 to 775,000 counterinsurgents -- whether native or foreign. Furthermore, typical counterinsurgency missions require such concentrations of forces for a decade or more. Given these realities, we could soon hear cries of "surge," "if only," and "not enough."

Even if the United States and its allies committed themselves to decades of armed nation building, success against al Qaeda would hardly be guaranteed. After all, in the unlikely event that we forged a stable Afghanistan, al Qaeda would simply reposition its presence into other regions of the world.

It is well past time for the United States to adapt means to ends. The choice for President Obama is not between counterterrorism or counterinsurgency; but between counterterrorism and counterterrorism combined with counterinsurgency. Protecting the United States from terrorism does not require U.S. troops to police Afghan villages. Where terrorists do appear, we hardly need to tinker with their communal identities. We can target our enemies with allies on the ground or, if that fails, by relying on timely intelligence for use in targeted airstrikes or small-unit raids.

President Obama's decision on Afghanistan could define his presidency. If an escalating military strategy leads only to thousands of more deaths, and at a cost of tens or hundreds of billions of dollars, then that is a bitter legacy indeed.