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Are Our Goals in Afghanistan 'Fairly Modest'?

In an interview that aired yesterday on CBS's Early Show, President Obama said his objective for Afghanistan is "fairly modest."

On its face, the mission seems modest enough: "don't allow terrorists to operate from this region; don't allow them to create big training camps and to plan attacks against the US homeland with impunity." In reality, such a policy is not modest in the least. A commitment to never allow terrorists to resurface not only serves as a convenient rationale to prolong the mission, but also as an open-ended justification to intervene anywhere in the world without hesitation.

Moreover, the president claims that strengthening the capacity of a sovereign Afghan government will enhance America's security, but the basis of this correlation is never explicitly clarified. It's also unclear how promoting "a more capable, accountable and effective" Afghan government; cracking down on the cultivation of illegal narcotics; providing economic assistance to a Pakistani government that supports the very insurgents our soldiers are fighting; and enforcing Western rule of law is "fairly modest." To imagine that we can create a functioning economy and bring major improvements to state institutions through some "government in a box," social-engineering laboratory underscores the ignorance and arrogance of our government planners.

If indeed our goal is to monitor terrorists and prevent the creation of big training camps, rather than propping up a failed state, U.S. leaders should scale-down to a narrower counterterrorism mission that can assemble quickly and strike effectively and cheaply at "real" enemies.

Lately, it has become popular to endorse peace talks with the Taliban. Generally speaking, I endorse diplomatic engagement with our enemies, including the Taliban. And after nearly a decade at war, any face-saving way out sounds intuitively appealing. But this policy prescription is not the panacea that it is made out be. Indeed, such a power-sharing deal may open a Pandora's box.

For the U.S. and NATO, the red line in their nation-building endeavor is the Afghan constitution.

Not only is this document the foundation of Afghanistan's democratic political institutions (wobbly and imperfect as they may be), but it also enshrines the legal and political rights of the Afghan people we ostensibly seek to protect. For the U.S. and NATO to scale down its presence in Afghanistan-and because there is no assurance that the Taliban will adhere to these new political and social conditions-peace talks implicitly demand a third-party with the wherewithal to enforce the terms of any power-sharing agreement. Enter: a prolonged U.S.-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

Unless the Taliban acquiesce to the norms introduced since the 2001 invasion, there is little to stop them from committing actions in flagrant violation of any shared agreement. In this respect, peace talks with the senior Taliban leadership must commit the residual presence of U.S. troops long after our official date of withdrawal.

In short, no agreement, law, treaty, or contract is self-reinforcing. And unless the United States is prepared to enforce the conditions of a power-sharing agreement, it should renounce its commitment to spread the legal rights articulated in the Afghan constitution.

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