



Responsible Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Eight years after the invasion of Afghanistan, the effort to stabilize the nation is at a critical stage. The administration is facing an incredibly complex, and difficult decision about whether or not to increase the numbers of troops to the region - a "surge" like the one employed with limited success in Iraq under General Petraeus. The United States must withdraw the bulk of its troops from Afghanistan by June 2010 and leave a light force in the country thereafter. The US government and Western allies should not radically alter the nature of the current, delicate, situation with an enhanced military presence but rather should pragmatically maintain a light footprint to prevent Afghanistan from lapsing into civil war and being used as a terrorist sanctuary.

Thoughtful proponents of increasing US troops argue that Afghanistan requires more military forces to counter the Taliban, al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists, and prop up the Afghan government until it can stand on its own feet with its own national military and police forces. Troop surge proponents overlook the fundamental fact that a political compromise is the only sustainable solution for peace in Afghanistan. US and foreign occupation forces do not directly support such a process and only serve to delude American politicians and citizens into believing we are contributing to something positive in the region.

Only Afghans themselves can create a political solution to the problems in their country: the best the US and foreign powers can do is to provide minimal - yet sustained - support to aid this long and difficult process. Ironically, a troop surge actually increases the likelihood of causing Americans to become cynical about the prospects of aiding Afghanistan because few results will emerge in a short time span following troop increases. Once Americans become cynical about such efforts, it is likely citizens will demand a total withdrawal, arguably

the worst possible unintended consequence of such a policy. Moreover, an increased number of troops feed the propaganda machine of the Taliban and al Qaeda affiliates who claim they are killing infidels and rebelling against a foreign occupation.

Misapplication of the 1990's model. Critics of a troop drawdown argue that this was the same strategy the US pursued in Afghanistan in the early 1990s but they overlook the fact that the Taliban at the time were a young and relatively unknown political movement. Many Afghans have direct, harsh experience of life under the Taliban and would oppose such a movement from coming back into power unlike the 1990s when many Afghans passively supported the Taliban to bring peace during the civil war.

Pakistan. Critics also argue that Pakistan's foreign and national security strategy of "strategic depth" relies on Afghanistan functioning as a strong Pakistani ally against India. They argue that Pakistan supported the Taliban and would support them again to overthrow a democratic, Western-friendly Afghanistan with links to Hindu India and Shi'a Iran. They also argue that Western forces fighting the Taliban have pushed them from Afghanistan into Pakistan and stirred up Islamist networks and anger against the Pakistani government for acquiescing to the West. Such criticism assumes that an increased US military presence in the region will be able to destroy and disrupt the Taliban to the point that they are no longer a major sanctuary for trans-national terrorism. Also, this overlooks the fact that Pakistan has deep tensions with India and has cultivated Islamist groups and insurgents in Kashmir as a tool to undermine their post-Colonial enemy. The West cannot properly fix this problem with more military force.

Safe Havens in Many Places. Those in favor of a greater military presence also argue that once we leave, al Qaeda will take sanctuary in the country again and continue to launch attacks against the West like the did on 9/11. The reality is that most experts agree that a small number of troops in the region, along with increased Special Forces and intelligence operatives deployed to Afghanistan, can thwart global terrorist plans. Moreover, al Qaeda and global terrorists will inevitably then find safe-haven in Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and numerous other countries around the world. Should we send troop surges to all of these countries just to thwart the possibility of an Islamist cell from attacking the West? That is not a sustainable strategy.

The root of the issue is that Americans want to believe we can solve the multi-faceted conflicts in a region by putting more military forces on the ground to "keep the peace" and "kill the bad guys."

Americans must demilitarize their view of foreign and national security policy so we can clearly determine realistic options to enhance our interests in the region and sincerely promote a more humane and viable strategy - and one that will succeed both in the short term as well as the long term.

The political branches need to seriously debate now how to responsibly, and pragmatically, withdraw from Afghanistan while leaving behind adequate assets to protect our friends and interests.
