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Why Remain in Afghanistan?

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DECEMBER 12, 2013

The White House is pushing hard to keep a significant number of American soldiers in Afghanistan contrary to President Barack Obama's earlier pledge to have them all out by the end of 2014. As the United States President has demonstrated himself to be a habitual liar that failure to connect promises made in 2008 with promises broken in 2013 should surprise no one. Afghan President Hamid Karzai is resisting the effort, insisting that no such agreement be ratified until April of next year, which he well knows would be too late as the United States likely will accelerate plans to withdraw from the country completely by the end of 2014 if there is no agreement by January. Karzai, who will be leaving office next Spring and is undoubtedly looking forward to a comfortable retirement in Dubai in close proximity to the bank accounts holding all the money he stole, is quite likely relying on a continued US presence no matter what agreement is reached. Beyond that, he is playing off his various constituencies in Afghanistan in an effort to make sure that he and his family have a base of support after he leaves office – he knows that agreeing to a long term deal with Washington is unpopular and it is useful for him to appear to be a patriotic Afghan by demanding no more raids on Afghan homes and a framework for peace talks with the Taliban.

The White House's official explanation for why the United States has to remain in Afghanistan goes something like this: al-Qaeda is still based in nearby Pakistan and is a threat that has to be dealt with. It is most practical to do so from bases inside Afghanistan, using drones and special ops resources. A small residual military presence could man the major US base at Bagram and several other drone bases around the country while helping to secure US diplomatic facilities in the capital Kabul. There are also a number of small CIA bases in Afghanistan as well as technical collection sites along the Iranian border that acquire signals intelligence relating to Iran, but they are relatively insignificant in the calculus being made regarding continued presence in Afghanistan.

As the remaining army units will not have the ability to initiate any major ground operations, the residual military force will be tasked with protecting the other components of the American presence that will not be leaving, which means the CIA facilities which operate the drones and also the diplomatic mission. The CIA bases, for both security and cover reasons, are generally embedded in military facilities, which would have to change. But the broader argument for remaining to protect those who are not leaving is somewhat shaky as the CIA will undoubtedly retain a robust armed presence inside Afghanistan and is fully capable of monitoring Pakistan while continuing drone operations. Indeed, it is more capable at those two tasks than the military because it also has a significant presence inside Pakistan itself.

The US Embassy in Kabul and whatever Consulates remain open will undoubtedly employ thousands of armed contractors as a security force, as the Baghdad Embassy did when the US Army left Iraq. For what it's worth, all the redevelopment schemes, which have wasted billions of US taxpayer dollars will essentially be abandoned no matter what the outcome of negotiations to stay as the Embassy will not be able to maintain them without a security bubble and the NGOs that are involved will return home when the situation deteriorates, as it surely will no matter what agreement is reached.

A secondary reason for staying, which is only cited occasionally, is to protect the Afghan government itself, with US troops serving as an on-demand Praetorian Guard to keep the government from falling either to the insurgents or to other internal dissidents. Major General Robert Scales, desperately seeking and finding five somewhat overlapping reasons for staying the course that would appeal to his FOX News audience, has predicted that if NATO forces leave the country it would result in "total chaos," akin to Iraq after the American withdrawal. American soldiers would therefore be seen as the antidote for chaos, unanticipated blowback from the policies in place over the past twelve years that have permitted the creation of the world's most corrupt government in Kabul.

Americans who are not engaged in the groupthink that prevails in White House and inside the Beltway circles should be asking themselves whether any of the reasons being provided to justify an enduring US presence in Afghanistan make sense. Foremost is the argument about the threat coming from al-Qaeda in neighboring Pakistan. The group has, in fact, been devastated by US and Pakistani military action of various kinds since 9/11, culminating in the reported killing of Osama bin Laden. The most recent 2012 State Department annual report on terrorism hardly reveals a powerful and implacable enemy. It states that “The al-Qa’ida (AQ) core, under the direction of Ayman al-Zawahiri, has been significantly degraded as a result of ongoing worldwide efforts against the organization. Usama bin Laden’s death was the most important milestone in the fight against AQ, but there have been other successes – dozens of senior AQ leaders have been removed from the fight in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Ilyas Kashmiri, one of the most capable AQ operatives in South Asia, and Atiya Abdul Rahman, AQ’s second-in-command, were killed in Pakistan in 2011. AQ leaders Abu Yahya Al-Libi and Abu Zaid al-Kuwaiti were killed in 2012. As a result of these leadership losses, the AQ core’s ability to direct the activities and attacks of its affiliates has diminished, as its leaders focus increasingly on survival.”

In reality, American cross border operations for the past five years have concentrated on attacking the Taliban in Pakistan, a group which has no agenda or even capability to carry out terrorist acts in the United States. So the threat of the return of al-Qaeda is more speculative than real. Would the United States actually be safer if it commits considerable resources to strike the al-Qaeda remnants in Pakistan? It would be difficult to make that case, particularly when genuine and lethal al-Qaeda affiliates have shifted their operations to places like Yemen, East Africa, Iraq and, increasingly, Syria.

So it does all comes down to propping up the Afghan government as it is now clear than no one believes that the constantly reengineered Afghan army and police are capable of defeating any opponent. Those who support that objective might argue that the presence would be temporary, i.e. taking only the time required to train local security forces to give the government breathing space to reform itself. Well, that training process has been going on for more than ten years already and is broken beyond repair. Foreign soldiers training Afghan troops carry their weapons, wear body armor, and limit their actual contact with their “allies” because they know the recruits cannot be trusted let alone relied upon. And government corruption is so institutionalized that reform is a fantasy.

Even in a worst case scenario of a Taliban takeover, no Afghan government would dare reinstall al-Qaeda as it would invite instant and massive retaliation from the United States. Because

remaining in country will not lead either to government reform or national security in 2014 or any time thereafter, the intention of staying on to maintain the existing government is a fool's game, with no real end in sight and no real objective beyond preserving the *status quo*, kicking the Afghanistan can down the road yet again for whoever becomes American president in 2016. The Afghans themselves clearly believe that the Taliban will somehow become at least part of their government in the near future, so it is perhaps time that Washington come to the same conclusion and cut a deal so it can stop wasting American lives and treasure on a losing cause.

A final possible reason for staying in Afghanistan is more-or-less invisible, and that would be Washington's saving face for having killed thousands of people and wasted hundreds of billions of dollars. It would be to maintain the Obama fiction that Afghanistan is somehow a "good war." An abrupt pullout will make it all look like another major foreign policy failure, a perception that will surely have a political fallout for 2016 after the American people realize that they have yet again been conned, as they finally concluded regarding Iraq. So I guess it all comes down to the art of obtaining power and keeping it, both in Washington and Kabul, which is not a very good reason for continuing a war that should have ended in 2002.