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AMERICA'S FLAWED AFGHANISTAN STRATEGY

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Despite the lavish time and attention that the Obama administration devoted to reviewing its Afghanistan strategy, the result was more continuity than change. The administration adjusted U.S. troops levels and shifted some operational methods but accepted the most basic—and questionable—assumptions of the Bush strategy. Unfortunately, these do not hold up under close scrutiny. The new strategy, like the old one, totters on a dangerously flawed foundation.

Both the Bush and Obama strategies assume that al-Qaeda needs state support or sanctuary. That, after all, is the fundamental rationale for continued American involvement in Afghanistan. But throughout the “war on terror,” no one has made a persuasive case that the September 11, 2001, attacks would not have happened had al-Qaeda not had bases in Afghanistan. While it may take meetings and phone calls to plot terrorism, these can be done from nearly anywhere. Al-Qaeda's Afghanistan sanctuary was a convenience, not a necessity. Destroying the sanctuary has not stopped bin Laden and his henchmen from plotting new attacks.

Why, then, should the United States devote billions of dollars fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan if doing so has little effect on al-Qaeda's ability to launch terrorism? The answer says more about the way Americans think than it does about how terrorists operate. The United States has expended great effort to eradicate al-Qaeda's bases and training camps less because they were important than because we are effective at it. There is an old saying that, “when all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.” America has an amazing hammer—its military—which is very good at seizing and controlling territory. So, we reasoned, eradicating bases and training camps will cripple al-Qaeda. Yet there is no evidence to validate this idea.

The Obama strategy also assumes that without U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban will regain control. But the Taliban came to power in 1996 because the warlords opposing it had little outside support and, more importantly, because Afghans did not understand just what Taliban rule would mean and thus did little to resist it. Now they do know and will resist, at least outside Afghanistan's Pashtun areas. Simply funding the Afghan government and providing it with training and advice can prevent an outright Taliban victory without a large U.S. military presence.

The Obama strategy then assumes that if the Taliban regains control of Afghanistan, it will again provide bases and sanctuary to al-Qaeda. The Pentagon's newly released *Quadrennial Defense Review* warned of al-Qaeda "regaining sanctuary in Afghanistan." In his December 2009 speech at West Point, President Obama stated that al-Qaeda would "operate with impunity" if the region "slides backward." This is only true if the Taliban is remarkably stupid. Before September 11, 2001, the Taliban allowed al-Qaeda to train and plot in Afghanistan because it was profoundly ignorant of American intentions and power. The United States, Taliban leaders believed, understood enough history to not intervene in Afghanistan. Now they know better. If the Taliban somehow returned to power, it would face enemies enough without provoking another American assault or intervention by giving al-Qaeda a free hand.

Finally, the Obama strategy assumes that if the Taliban regained control of some or all of Afghanistan and did, for some reason, provide support and sanctuary to al-Qaeda, this would increase the threat to the United States and the other NATO countries. Again, this overlooks history. Al-Qaeda was able to plot terrorism from Afghanistan because the United States was unaware of the impending danger. Had America known what was coming, it certainly would have rendered al-Qaeda's Afghanistan bases useless even without a full scale invasion. There is no reason to believe that if al-Qaeda somehow recreated its pre-September 11 Afghanistan sanctuary that the United States would not quickly destroy it.

Ultimately, then, the basic rationale of American strategy in Afghanistan is questionable. Certainly America cannot ignore that country as it did before September 11, 2001, and should continue supporting the national government and other Afghans opposed to the Taliban. But in strategy, balance is the key—the expected security benefits of any action must justify the costs and risks. Today, America's Afghanistan strategy, with its flawed assumptions, is badly out of balance.

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