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Global Politician

Afghanistan, America's Dilemma

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On June 22, President Obama, while unveiling his first and second phase of American troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, observed that “the tide of war” was receding.

Seeing what I saw in Kabul during my last visit in May—and I have traveled to Afghanistan some 30 times since early 2002—I find it difficult to understand what the President means.

During that trip, I saw more roadblocks than during any of my previous visits. Additional layers of protective Hesco barriers had been added around buildings. New and higher blast-resistance concrete walls surrounded more properties. I witnessed a higher sense of doom than ever before. The news over the past three months or so confirms my findings:

- May was the deadliest month for civilians since the UN began collecting such data in 2007.
- In the first five months of this year, 91,000 civilians have fled their homes and became internal refugees. In 2010, that number for the same period was 42,000. These internally displaced people live in abject poverty and without the slightest hope that their tragedy would end any time soon.
- Just a few days ago, the chief of Bamiyan's provincial counsel—a province considered to be very safe—was decapitated.

- In Takhar, another so-called safe province, a suicide bomber blew up the northern region's police commander right outside the provincial governor's office.
- In Kunduz, also counted among Afghanistan's safe provinces, a suicide bomber killed the provincial chief of police. - The massive invasion of Marja failed to clear the area from enemy fighters. According to most observers, the Taliban has moved back and, at night, is in full control of the town.
- In Kandahar, where a carefully planned military expedition was mounted to dislodge the insurgents, the Taliban, in a dramatic display of its continued presence, freed about 500 of its fighters from a prison located in the heart of Kandahar City.
- On the economic front, a congressional study has concluded that 97% percent of Afghanistan's GDP comes from sources other than the country's legal, indigenous economic activities.
- Despite all the talk about corruption, business in Kabul is as usual. The collapse of Kabul Bank, Afghanistan's largest, is an unmistakable example of thievery among some the country's leaders.

In short, after spending additional billions of dollars and sacrificing more American, coalition, and Afghan lives, not much has changed in Afghanistan since the surge and the implementation of the President's strategy. As before, lawlessness and corruption present the Taliban with a fertile ground to expand its influence. The poppy trade continues to thrive. Most important, no end to the war is in sight.

I believe the subject of discussion should not be the right or wrong number of boots on the ground. The question should be why America has failed in Afghanistan. Unless we understand the most important issues fueling this conflict, America will not succeed no matter how much money it spends and how many soldiers it stations or withdraws from Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan does not have its origin within Afghanistan. Nor is it rooted in international terrorism. This is a regional and ideological struggle. The premise that the Taliban will accept accommodation and Pakistan will change its policy toward Afghanistan is dead wrong.

The Taliban will not compromise its central beliefs for the sake of peace with the Karzai regime. While America's dire economic and financial circumstances pressure Washington to end the war, the Taliban don't feel under any time restraint. It believes it is fighting for God and claims that this fight could go on for decades or even centuries.

As for Pakistan, as long as it views India as its mortal enemy and fears the potential of a two-front war—an invasion from India and Afghanistan—it will do all it can to prevent a stable Afghanistan that is beyond its influence, especially if India has a strong political and economic foothold there.

And let's not forget Afghanistan's warlords. Having gained vastly more powerful and influential during the American occupation, they now have become a part of the dilemma. They have

thrived in chaos and are bent on preserving the present state of lawlessness in Afghanistan. They will torpedo any effort toward establishing the rule of law in that country.

To bring peace to the region and stability to Afghanistan, Mr. Obama must come to terms with these phenomena. The talk in Washington about force levels in Afghanistan has little to do with the forces behind the war in Afghanistan and the unrest in South Asia. It is based on local politics and meant for local consumption.