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'Staying the Course' Prolongs Afghan War

by Malou Innocent

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Many prominent opinion leaders, including Henry Kissinger, argue that America should not withdraw from Afghanistan because doing so would boost jihadism globally and make America look weak. They concede that the war in Central Asia will be long, expensive and risky, but nevertheless claim it is ultimately worth waging. But those arguments and countless others rarely withstand close scrutiny.

From a strategic and economic perspective, no tangible gains could outweigh the costs of America maintaining an indefinite presence in Afghanistan. Indeed, such a course would be counterproductive, as the US military presence in the region strengthens the very jihadist forces it seeks to defeat and erodes America's already tattered reputation abroad.

Take, for example, current operations against the Taleban, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Jalaluddin Haqqani network and other jihadist groups in Afghanistan. Although the US military makes every effort to avoid civilian deaths, its air strikes kill innocent bystanders who are often used by insurgents as human shields.

As long as militants can exploit such collateral damage for their propaganda, they will draw more recruits to their cause and erode the legitimacy of President Hamid Karzai's regime. Remaining in Afghanistan to protect America's reputation demonstrates flawed reasoning: prolonging combat operations will kill even more civilians and reinforce the narrative that militants are fighting against the injustice of foreign occupation.

Many analysts in Washington also underestimate the importance of history, culture and nationalism.

The Pashtunwali code of honour, the pre-Islamic tribal code to which Pashtun tribes straddling the Afghan-Pakistan border adhere, highly values honour and revenge. Collateral

damage from US drone attacks in northwest Pakistan ripples disastrously across such a society, where personal and collective vendettas can last generations.

People in Washington posit the threat from extremists as the justification for America's presence. But, far too often, those same people overlook how detrimental unwelcome American interference can be.

In the case of Afghanistan and neighbouring, nuclear-armed Pakistan, policymakers have neglected the extent to which the US-Nato mission bolsters support for jihadists in the region.

The fear of America losing the world's respect after withdrawing from Afghanistan has been instrumental in selling a bad foreign policy to the American public. It also perpetuates former president George W. Bush's myopic vision that war enhances America's authority.

The coalition should cease military escalation and instead prepare an exit strategy. Because, as in Vietnam, the longer America stays and the more money it spends, the more it will feel it must remain in the country to validate the investment. That's not a winning strategy.