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Afghanistan: The Deadliest Month and It's Time to Get Out

by Malou Innocent

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July has been the deadliest month yet for U.S. forces in Afghanistan. At least 27 troops have died so far this month, and an estimated 746 soldiers have died since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom.

To combat the growing Taliban insurgency, the United States recently dispatched 4,000 troops to Afghanistan's restive eastern and southern provinces. The influx of troops, known as Operation Strike of the Sword, will be aimed at clearing Taliban fighters from the lower Helmand River valley and closing the border with Pakistan.

But after nearly eight years of fighting in Afghanistan, the war's strategic rationale still remains tenuous. Central Asia holds little intrinsic strategic value to the United States, and America's security will not necessarily be endangered even if an oppressive regime takes over a contiguous fraction of Afghan territory. Given Afghanistan's numerous challenges, and the fact that a protracted guerrilla war will weaken the United States militarily and economically, the fundamental objective should be to get out of Afghanistan.

Eight years after the fall of the Taliban regime, the country still struggles to survive under the most brutal circumstances: corrupt and ineffective state institutions; thousands of miles of unguarded borders; pervasive illiteracy among a largely rural and decentralized population; a weak president; and a dysfunctional international alliance. As if that weren't enough, some of Afghanistan's neighbors have incentives to foment instability there.

Recently, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who commanded special operations forces in Iraq and this month became the commander of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, said he wants to avoid more civilian deaths. Concern over civilian casualties makes sense in counterinsurgency, since the local population is the strategic center of gravity. I'll concede that the infusion of 21,000 more troops by the end of this year — which Obama approved within his first 100 days in office — may lead to a reduction in violence in the medium-term.

But the elephant in the Pentagon is that the intractable cross-border insurgency will likely outlive the presence of international troops. Honestly, Afghanistan is not a winnable war by any stretch of the imagination.

Regardless, some analysts, like former national security advisor Henry Kissinger, Council on Foreign Relations scholar Stephen Biddle, and many others, argue that America must not withdraw from Afghanistan, because doing so would boost jihadism globally and make America look weak. But if leaving would make America look weak, trying to stay indefinitely while accomplishing little would appear even worse.

Take, for example, current operations to fight the Taliban, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Haqqani network, and other jihadist groups in Afghanistan. Despite the best efforts of the U.S. military to avoid harming innocents, the sheer magnitude of air strikes means that civilian casualties are inevitable. Thus, the argument that U.S. forces must remain in Afghanistan (apparently indefinitely) to protect America's reputation is dubious, because prolonging combat operations will kill even more civilians and reinforce the narrative that militants are fighting against foreign occupiers.

Sadly, the longer we stay in Afghanistan and the more money we spend, the more we'll feel compelled to remain in the country to validate the investment. A similar self-imposed predicament plagued U.S. officials during the war in Vietnam. Oddly enough, when opinion leaders in Washington talk about "lessons learned" from Vietnam and other conflicts, they typically draw the wrong lesson: not that America should avoid intervening in someone else's domestic dispute, but that America should never give up after having intervened, no matter what the cost. Driven by that misguided analysis, the United States risks repeating the same mistake in Afghanistan.

Perhaps most troubling about the reflexive "stay the course" mentality of some Americans is the widespread insensitivity about the thousands of people — civilian and military, domestic and foreign — killed, maimed, and traumatized in war. But history shows that, sooner or later, disenchantment will manifest in public and congressional attitudes. After nearly a decade in Afghanistan, even the memory of 9/11 might not be sufficient to outweigh the sacrifice in blood and treasure.

The most important argument against the "withdrawal is weak-kneed" meme is that America's military roams the planet, controls the skies and space, faces no peer competitor, and wields one of the planet's largest nuclear arsenals. America is responsible for almost half of the world's military spending, and can project its power to the most inaccessible corners of the globe. Thus, the fear that America would appear "weak" after withdrawing from Afghanistan is irrational.

Unfortunately, bureaucratic inertia and a misplaced conception of Washington's moral obligations (an argument that more often than not legitimizes America's military occupation of a foreign people) threaten to trap the United States in Afghanistan for decades. Overall, remaining in Afghanistan is more likely to tarnish America's reputation and undermine U.S. security than would withdrawal.

Ideally, the United States should have already reduced its visibility in the region. Denying a sanctuary to terrorists that seek to attack the United States can be done through aerial surveillance, retaining covert operatives for discrete operations against specific targets, and

ongoing intelligence-sharing with the Afghan and Pakistani governments. The United States can continue to disrupt terrorist havens without perpetuating a large-scale military presence on the ground. Moreover, going after al Qaeda does not require Washington to pacify the entire country.

America's objective has been to eradicate the parties responsible for the atrocities committed on September 11th. The United States should not go beyond that objective by combating a regional insurgency or drifting into an open-ended occupation.