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Get Out of Afghanistan

by Charles V. Peña

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President Obama is considering two strategies for Afghanistan: sending in as many as 40,000 more troops to wage a full-blown counterinsurgency war (COIN in Army parlance), as General Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, has recommended, or keeping the number of troops at the current level of about 68,000 to wage a more limited, counterterrorist effort aimed at al Qaeda and, to a lesser degree, the Taliban.

There is a third option: End our military occupation and leave Afghanistan to the Afghans. Let them deal with al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

To begin, 40,000 more troops, which would bring the combined U.S. and NATO force to 140,000, wouldn't be enough to conduct an effective counterinsurgency. The historical standard for counterinsurgency is 20 troops per 1,000 civilians. This is the standard recognized in the COIN manual written in large part by General David Petraeus, now head of U.S. Central Command and McChrystal's superior officer. The population of Afghanistan is more than 32 million. An effective counterinsurgency would require 640,000 troops—more than the entire U.S. Army active-duty force (548,000) and nearly the combined total of the active-duty army and Marine Corps (749,000).

The current force size is sufficient to occupy Kabul, the capital, which has a population of nearly 3.5 million. Increasing the force to 140,000 would allow for the occupation of two or three more provinces, such as Kandahar, Helmand, or Herat—but it would still leave thirty provinces unprotected.

Counterinsurgency requires more than just troops, however. It also requires a willingness to use harsh, even brutal, tactics to suppress violence and quell the opposition in order to impose security and order—inevitably resulting in civilian casualties. The British, often thought of as the best in conducting counterinsurgency, had to use such methods to crush the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the 1950s. Such tactics in Afghanistan probably would increase resistance and fuel the insurgency.

Counterinsurgency also takes patience—years, in fact. The British spent seven years in Kenya fighting the Mau Mau insurgents and more than twenty years in Malaysia battling the Malayan National Liberation Army. The United States has been in Afghanistan eight years now, and with domestic support for the war waning (a recent CNN poll showed 58 percent opposed to the mission), an open-ended time commitment is doubtful.

A more targeted effort aimed at al-Qaeda—the actual terrorist threat to America - makes more sense than a full-blown counterinsurgency.

To begin, the so-called Biden strategy recognizes that the current incarnation of the Taliban is not synonymous with al-Qaeda. Some elements of the Taliban may still be wedded to the terrorist organization, but some, perhaps many, may just be vying for power. As such, they do not constitute a direct threat to America.

Such a strategy also needs to recognize that local al-Qaeda threats within Afghanistan are not necessarily the same as the pre-9/11 al-Qaeda threat to the United States. Ultimately, America's strategic interest is best served by seeing that the Afghan government not support or grant sanctuary to al Qaeda, even if that government is not able to completely eradicate the group.

The larger problem with both strategies is that they both involve continued U.S. military occupation. And occupation—however large or small—is a prescription for long-term failure, even if it results in short-term tactical success.

The presence of U.S. and NATO troops on Afghan soil breeds resentment among both the warlords and the population, making it easier to recruit insurgents and target the occupier. This is the same phenomenon that helped trigger al-Qaeda's attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001.

This is not to say that America deserved to be attacked; it is only to say that we need to understand why it happened.

Our strategy in Afghanistan must learn from—not repeat—our past mistakes. The insurgency in Afghanistan and the wider radicalism seeping through Islam is fueled in large part by unnecessary U.S. encroachment in Muslim countries. If we stick around we only put ourselves in harm's way.