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Afghanistan: Avoiding another Iraq

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Afghanistan poses a serious challenge to the incoming Obama administration. US military involvement there has been highly unpopular with the American electorate, yet troop withdrawal from the region is not necessarily the best option in the long run. To help stabilise Afghanistan, the new administration should take into consideration longer term issues.

THE INVASION of Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 had some initial successes, but as the war on terrorism wages on, we are facing an increasingly untenable situation in the region. The American public has been calling for a withdrawal of troops from both Iraq and Afghanistan for several years. However, pulling troops out from Afghanistan is not necessarily the best long-term option available to the incumbent regime as well as the incoming Obama administration. A hasty withdrawal would plunge the country and the region into greater instability. More importantly, the United States would need to deploy more troops to Afghanistan, apart from implementing other political and economic strategies, to address the variety of issues that beset Afghanistan.

Bringing Order to Afghanistan

During the run-up to the recent presidential election, both the Democratic and Republican candidates addressed key issues on their campaign trails such as US policies toward Iraq and Afghanistan. Barack Obama championed a less muscular unilateral foreign policy while favouring regional and multilateral cooperation. If followed through, Obama would chart a drastically different foreign policy course from that mapped out by his predecessor. The Bush administration has appeared to be more heavy-handed in terms of its attitude. It has been largely driven by neoconservative ideas, and has forcibly changed regimes to favour the emergence of democratic nation-states. This interventionist approach has been most apparent in Afghanistan where instability prevails.

The fundamental problems that the Afghan government faces at present stem from its inability to bring order and stability to large parts of the country, especially the regions outside Kabul and areas along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The rural regions, particularly the southern and eastern provinces, have remained beyond the central government's control. The Taliban maintains a strong presence in these

provinces despite the successful attempts by US troops to drive them out of these areas in 2001. Taliban insurgents have managed to return to the territories and to retain a certain level of public support. They have established parallel hierarchies that offer a desperate rural populace some form of stability, whereas the government and coalition forces have failed to deliver on their promise to restore order.

Consequently, the key immediate objective in Afghanistan is to meet the basic needs of the people in the rural areas and to clamp down on the security problems across the country to assert the Afghan government's claim to authority. The American president-elect's website Change.gov states that "Obama and Biden will demand the Afghan government do more, including cracking down on corruption and the illicit opium trade". The Afghan government has to indeed address these issues, but it is most likely unable to do so without external assistance.

The longer-term issues

To help stabilise Afghanistan, the incoming Obama administration would have to take into consideration the longer term issues that cannot be addressed solely by a short-term surge in the deployment of troops to the country. The expansion of US and coalition troop strength in Afghanistan could help the Kabul government assert more control over the rugged outlying areas where tribal warlords still wield considerable authority. However, focusing on this strategy fails to take into account the existing conditions and underlying reasons that sustained the influence, if not growing strength, of the insurgents and tribal leaders in those remote regions outside of Kabul.

As in the case of Iraq, there is a need for the Americans to work with the Afghan government to engage local leaders in dialogue to identify local grievances. There is also a need to establish, at the very least, a basic political infrastructure to connect with villagers who would otherwise have no conception of belonging to the nation-state of Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan is fundamentally different from Iraq as the country lacks established urban centres. Social order in Afghanistan is also organized along tribal communities scattered across the rugged countryside.

As a result, the nation-building efforts in Afghanistan would arguably expend greater resources and time than that incurred by the Americans in rebuilding Germany and Japan after World War II. Cooperation from the Afghan government would be vital. There would have to be fundamental changes made to the Afghan social, political, and economic infrastructure for Kabul to be able to take on the responsibility of maintaining security on its own and to address the needs of its citizens.

The US cannot bear the burden of rebuilding Afghanistan alone. It has its own domestic concerns and myriad other foreign policy issues to address. But the urgency of the Afghan situation is too severe for the issue to be neglected. The US would need to persuade other parties to help Afghanistan attain minimum standards of self-sufficiency and security. In addition, the new administration would have to convince the American people that the continued US military presence in Afghanistan is necessary.

If there is to be greater involvement in Afghanistan, Obama and his administration would have to push for certain policies, such as multilateral arrangements with other countries, to be more involved in Afghanistan and the region -- policies that could be highly contentious and unpopular. Obama's charisma might prove fortuitous in such a situation, but it remains to be seen whether it is sufficient to win over public opinion in the long run.

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