



## **Time to rethink Afghanistan policy**

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Recently, I visited Afghanistan as part of a congressional delegation of five members from the House Armed Services Committee. We were briefed on all aspects of the counterinsurgency mission: the development of Afghan institutions of governance; efforts to reshape Afghan society (i.e., education, role of women, economic development); the training of Afghan security forces (both police and the army); and our own operations, as well as those conducted by our coalition partners. The most inspiring part for me was visiting Helmand province and talking to the Marines on the front lines.

I deeply appreciate all of the sacrifices our military has made in Afghanistan. However, I left still believing the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan was initially unnecessary. It was based on the unrealistic idealism of nation-building. In my view, the nation-building policy being implemented in Afghanistan is tantamount to a form of cultural imperialism that assumes "everybody really wants to be like us and will be just like us if only given the chance."

The Taliban controlled much of Afghanistan prior to 9/11 and gave safe harbor to al-Qaeda, who attacked us. Shortly after 9/11, we were right to give air, advisory, and logistical support to the anti-Taliban forces, the Northern Alliance, who defeated the Taliban. However, instead of using our leverage to encourage the formation of an inclusive government reflecting the ethnic makeup and political culture of the country, the U.S. pushed the victors aside and superimposed a political process that gave them the government we wanted them to have.

At this point, that government lacks legitimacy, is incompetent, and has a reputation for large-scale corruption. The weakness of the central government in Kabul opened the door for the Taliban to regain many of the areas lost when it was routed back in 2001.

Although there is no doubt that we have made costly mistakes in Afghanistan, it doesn't change the fact that the U.S. continues to have significant national security interests in the region. The fate of Pakistan — a country with a dangerous mix of instability, radical Islamic sympathies, and nuclear weapons — is inextricably linked to Afghanistan. A victory for the Taliban in Afghanistan would serve to help the Taliban on the other side of the Durand Line with their fight against the government of Pakistan. We also need to make sure that al-Qaeda does not return to Afghanistan and that the U.S. has the ability to use Afghanistan as a base for operations against al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Pakistan.

Our continued security interests in the region do not mean that we must also continue the same policy. We must recognize that our current policy in Afghanistan has been too costly to our military, with over 1,000 lives lost, and a price tag of more than \$250 billion since the beginning of the war.

Our current mission in Afghanistan goes far beyond accomplishing our national security objectives. We need to lower the governance bar in Afghanistan by allowing decentralized institutions that, albeit imperfect by Western standards, are culturally much closer to the Afghan people. We must de-emphasize the restructuring of Afghan society as a primary objective, and stop building costly infrastructure projects at U.S. taxpayer expense. An abbreviated version of the counterinsurgency strategy should be limited to relatively secure areas and a counterterrorism approach of targeting threats in specific areas instead of occupying key terrain should be used for Taliban-controlled regions.

Subsequently, as Afghan security forces increase their capabilities and their government becomes more effective in providing basic services, we should encourage them to regain the areas controlled by the Taliban — with our military in a limited support role, as opposed to a heavy Afghan dependence on our forces to secure and hold these areas.

Afghanistan is a marathon, not a sprint. We need realistic expectations, a lighter U.S. footprint, a slower pace, and an understanding that this is going to take a long time.

Read more at [\*The Denver Post\*](#)

