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Opinion

Pull the plug on the Afghan surge

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Although the aborted electoral run-off in Afghanistan has further weakened the country's already troubled government, the Obama administration has little choice but to work with President **Hamid Karzai**. Indeed, the electoral mess paradoxically makes it easier for President Obama to decide on America's next steps in the war. The turmoil in Kabul should convince the White House that General Stanley McChrystal's **plan to pursue counterinsurgency** in the countryside is a bridge too far.

The US commander in Afghanistan would have coalition forces adopt a "population-centric" strategy in which they address "the needs and grievances of the people in their local environment". In Iraq, a similar strategy did succeed in undercutting the Sunni insurgency. But Iraq's central government was in the midst of stabilising and increasing its effectiveness, enabling it to rebuild the institutional infrastructure of a functioning state. With an Afghan government of questionable legitimacy and limited efficacy in control of only 30 per cent of the country – and much of the rest under the sway of local warlords – surging thousands of fresh troops into lawless rural areas is a recipe for chasing after unattainable ends with insufficient means.

Instead, Mr Obama should decisively scale back the mission in Afghanistan. He should do so by focusing coalition operations on consolidating control in strategically important locations as well as more stable areas in the centre and north of the country. From these secure and defensible zones, the coalition would focus on three tasks.

First, it would build up the political and economic infrastructure of a rump Afghanistan, with the aim of establishing the robust institutions and markets essential to a functioning state. This effort is a critical priority: without a viable Afghan government, even successful efforts at counterinsurgency would be little more than an expensive palliative. Second, the coalition would carry out counterterrorism operations throughout those parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan where coalition forces would not regularly be deployed, seizing opportunities to strike at militant Taliban and al-Qaeda targets. Third, it would ramp up training of the Afghan army and police, building an indigenous force that would eventually undertake the countrywide counterinsurgency mission that Gen McChrystal now envisages for coalition forces – but without the nationalist backlash inevitably invited by foreign troops.

This three-pronged strategy has marked advantages over more ambitious as well as less demanding alternatives. Rather than spreading itself too thin, the coalition would focus its effort where it is most needed: on creating a capable and legitimate Afghan state that can gradually assume responsibility for governance and security throughout the country. It would also contain the scope of the US and European commitment without risking a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan – a major downside of rapid withdrawal or an exclusive focus on counterterrorism.

At the same time, the US would maintain access to bases needed to carry out counterterrorism operations and collect intelligence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Coalition forces rather than the Taliban would be adopting hit-and-run tactics, striking against militant cells that would be likely to seek to reconstitute themselves in areas from which coalition forces had retrenched. By taking the initiative on the battlefield, US and Nato troops would keep the Taliban and al-Qaeda on the defensive and deny them the ability to construct training camps and operational bases of the sort that existed prior to the US invasion in 2001.

This revamped strategy would also yield benefits in Pakistan. Coalition operations in Afghanistan have pushed the region's most dangerous and hardened fighters into Pakistan, contributing to increasing levels of insurgent violence and destabilising the nuclear-armed country. These militants are also largely outside the reach of coalition forces; Islamabad does not permit foreign troops to operate in Pakistan, leaving the US to rely on missile strikes from drones operating only in border areas.

Should coalition forces redeploy primarily to core regions in Afghanistan, some of the militants who fled to Pakistan would be likely to return, if only to escape Pakistan's ongoing offensive in **Waziristan**. If they did,

the threat to Pakistan would diminish and coalition forces could pursue the militants in Afghanistan without the restrictions they face in Pakistan.

The US cannot afford to let Afghanistan again fall under the sway of parties with terrorist designs against the west. Neither can it afford, however, to put additional resources behind a strategy that risks drawing Nato into an ever-deepening quagmire. By pursuing a strategy that combines counterterrorism with a focus on building a functioning Afghan state and army, the US may well succeed in keeping its means and ends in balance. Only then will Mr Obama be able to sustain the steady US commitment needed finally to bring peace to Afghanistan.

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