

The U.S. Must Rethink its Afghanistan Policy

U.S. policy in Afghanistan has been a miserable failure. Although the initial geopolitical rationale for invading the country was sound - removing the Taliban from power and damaging the Al Q'aeda network – subsequent policy decisions have lacked a fundamental understanding of the region's geography and culture. In recent months, Taliban power has grown again in areas with few coalition troops, Kabul has become the only safe oasis in a turbulent sea of provincial discord, and current poppy production is likely to produce some 600 tons of illicit heroin for the global marketplace. Bin Laden remains at large, likely protected by tribal leaders in the remote and mountainous northwest frontier region of Pakistan. In fact, finding Nemo has proved much easier than finding Osama! U.S. policymakers need to change direction in Afghanistan immediately and take a more locally based approach to policy development.

An overwhelming body of evidence has emerged over the past year to support the argument that the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq have distracted the U.S. from achieving its mission in Afghanistan. Widespread democracy in Afghanistan seems as unattainable today as it did during the long darkness of Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Although some infrastructure has been rebuilt, GNP has improved slightly, and more women are getting an education, conditions in Afghanistan still are dire for most citizens. Roads are poor, agriculture is under-funded, security is a significant problem beyond Kabul, and regional warlords continue to shape policy at the local level.

The failure of U.S. policy in Afghanistan results from a profound level of geographic and cultural ignorance about how the country is structured. Little attention has been paid to the geopolitical context of the region, especially its relationship with Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian republics. Policymakers tend to view Afghanistan as a homogenous political and cultural space, assuming that "Afghanis" can be the foundation of a future democratic state.

In reality, the country is made up of an uneasy alliance of myriad tribes – Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Nuristanis, to name but a few. For example, the Pashtu and Dari languages are part of the Iranian language branch, while the Uzbek and Turkmen clans speak a Turkic dialect. Practically, Afghanistan's identity is more locally based than national in nature, based on the tribe, clan, ethnic or linguistic group, or area of residence. Local geographies and culture are more important in the geopolitics of Afghanistan than any national conception of statehood, yet U.S. policy has failed to understand this and has failed to build national policies around local structures.

Further complicating regional geopolitics is the fact that the western half of modern Pakistan historically came under the control of the Pashtuns. Pashtun nationalists today often include western Pakistan as part of a Greater Pashtunistan, which creates additional challenges for outside powers as they attempt to develop regional political and economic policies. The fact that Osama bin Laden likely is hiding under the protection of tribesmen in the politically contentious northwestern border region of Pakistan should send a clear message to policymakers that all politics in this part of the world are local and tribal.

A more locally based approach to policy development would achieve the goals of the international coalition in Afghanistan more rapidly and more securely. Afghanistan cannot be reconstructed from the top down, nor can a "democratic" country be created out of the existing tribal structure. Afghanistan can only survive in the 21st century as a legitimate political state if it is reconstructed using the Swiss model. A recognition of regional strengths and weaknesses should be the cornerstone of a national policy, with weak federal or national power supporting a network of regional governorships that rest on a strong infrastructural base. Bottom up development of regional infrastructure, including roads, railroads, schools, hospitals, and trade networks, should be the primary mission of U.S. and other international groups in Afghanistan. Anything less will condemn Afghanistan to another decade of misery and conflict, and likely will embolden the Taliban and Al Q'aeda to exert renewed control over more remote regions of the country. Should this happen, the U.S. and its

partners in Afghanistan could well find themselves defending Kabul as the last oasis of security in the region.

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