

Mission Accomplished: Time to Pull Out of Afghanistan?

Written by Mohammad Zaman

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MOHAMMAD ZAMAN, JUN 16 2011

In the early hours of May 2, US Special Forces carrying out a mission deep inside Pakistani territory raided a compound in the city of Abbotabad and killed Osama bin Laden. It was a killing that prompted a number of politicians and commentators in the US and UK to argue that the Coalition's objectives in Afghanistan had been completed, and that their troops should be withdrawn from the country. Various US politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, reacted to the news by advocating for a swift withdrawal of US armed forces. British Prime Minister David Cameron quickly announced the withdrawal of 450 army personnel, even while his own military chiefs disagreed with him. Many analysts and commentators have seemingly come to the same conclusion, Yglesias and Sapolsky being two such cases.

The political and economic appeal behind these calls is easy to understand. The war in Afghanistan has stretched on for nearly a decade now, with no clear end in sight. It is hugely unpopular in both the UK and US, even more so given the present economic climate. Polls carried out in USA, both before and after the killing of bin Laden, show that a majority of Americans favour an end to the war and the withdrawal of their forces from Afghanistan. The British public too is largely against the presence of their troops in Afghanistan. Both countries have faced a recession prompting budgetary cutbacks and a bleak economic future, at least in the short-term. A pullout of the troops would put an end of the billions of dollars that are being spent each year on this conflict. Richard Lugar, a US senator and a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has been quoted as saying that "Afghanistan does not carry a strategic value that justifies 100,000 American troops and a \$100 billion per year cost, especially given current fiscal restraints." The war has also resulted in the deaths of about 1600 US and 370 British troops, again something that makes the war unpopular in both countries.

However, this is a very simplistic reading of the situation. It conflates the life, and death, of one person, Osama bin Laden, and the situation in Afghanistan. While no doubt the killing of bin Laden is a significant achievement, it is not the primary marker that concludes that it is time to bring back NATO forces. Afghanistan remains a highly dangerous and insecure place, and while the situation has improved considerably, many of the conditions that allowed the Taliban to emerge and flourish in the first place are still present in Afghanistan. The remit and control of the Karzai government barely extends beyond Kabul, and the police and the Afghan National Army are still underdeveloped and weak. The state faces opposition from not only the Taliban, but also other armed groups including warlords and former mujahedeen leaders. Similarly, reconstruction and state-building plans have yielded little concrete results. This situation would be made even worse by the sudden departure of foreign troops; something that would be exploited by the Taliban, and indeed other militant groups and warlords.

Matters are further complicated by the interests of the various regional and international actors in the affairs of Afghanistan. Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most discussed issue, is regarding how Pakistan would react to a quick recall of foreign troops from Afghan soil. Pakistan views Afghanistan not just as a neighbour, but as an area to be used as 'strategic depth' against bitter rivals India. Since the fall of the Taliban regime, India and Pakistan have been engaged in a diplomatic war to gain influence in Kabul, one that Pakistan seems to be losing. As such it views the Afghan Taliban as allies against the Karzai government which seems to favour India. While Pakistan has suffered immensely from terrorism at the hands of the Pakistan Taliban, their Afghan counterparts are

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seen as strategic assets by the Pakistan army and the ISI. Their support of the Afghan Taliban is already well documented (The Telegraph, Financial Times), and would probably become more overt if NATO troops were to leave Afghanistan in haste.

It is clear that the killing of bin Laden, and adding that the killing took place in Pakistan, has little bearing on the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Especially in recent years the Taliban and other local insurgents have been a far greater threat to NATO troops than Al-Qaeda. Something else that is also very clear is that the present Coalition strategy in Afghanistan is not working and has not produced the desired results. A purely military solution to the problem does not exist; a political solution is needed to bring stability and peace to the country. It is a process that will have to include not only the Coalition, the Afghan government and civil society, but also Afghanistan's neighbours and even some elements of the Taliban. It is a process that is going to be slow and laborious, but there is no other way.

There is no escaping from the fact that a multifaceted approach is necessary to ensure that Afghanistan is peaceful and secure, and that it does not slide back into the chaos that was prevalent after the Soviet pullback which enabled the Taliban to secure a foothold in the first place. Government institutions need to be rebuilt and made functional; the economy needs to be stimulated; the criminal and justice systems needs to be up and running; and a fully functioning and strong army and police force are needed. These are goals that for the most part can only be realised once conflict has subsided; which in turn requires a political solution. However, the groundwork for this has to be prepared while the Coalition forces are still in Afghanistan.

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