Obama’s Missed Opportunity in Afghanistan

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October 7, 2009

President Obama’s apparent decision that he is not going to call for a major troop reduction or more modest goals in Afghanistan means that he has lost a chance, perhaps his last, to steer American foreign policy in a substantially different direction and, implicitly, to raise some major questions about the U.S. role in the world that are rarely examined in Washington.

In fairness, sending more troops to Afghanistan has a certain logic to it because it is apparent that we cannot achieve our mission there at the current troop level. However, sending more troops is also something of the right answer to the wrong question. While it is clear that staying the course in Afghanistan is not going to lead to swift victory and soon to troop reduction, it is far from obvious that increasing the number of troops there will achieve this goal either. Instead both these options will almost certainly lead to a commitment to U.S. involvement in the region that has no clear end, and which very likely means an expansion of our role and presence beyond Afghanistan in ways, and with implications, that we cannot fully anticipate.

Committing to staying in Afghanistan, for example, will require supply routes that will lead the U.S. to become more closely involved with various authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments in Central Asia, and require some support from Russia. These are the kinds of minor issues which grow into larger issues as years go by—and future involvement in Afghanistan, if we stay, is probably best measured in years. Ten years from now a rise of fundamentalist Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia stoked by U.S. support for authoritarian regimes supporting the effort in Afghanistan, just to pick one bad potential outcome, is the kind of unforeseen consequence that could raise many problems for the U.S. and our allies.

A decision to leave Afghanistan would have signaled a very different direction in U.S. foreign policy. It might have been construed as a move to the left, but that would only be part of its meaning. It would also have indicated a willingness to question some assumptions which have been central to U.S. foreign policy since at least the end of the Cold War. A departure from Afghanistan would have indicated a recognition of the limits of US influence, an understanding of the extreme difficulty and cost associated with changing the domestic political arrangements of a country following a conflict, and the extent to which that is necessary to effectively combat Jihadist terror. It would, perhaps most importantly, have suggested that the U.S. is less interested in having a far flung presence of troops, bases and other programs throughout the globe because sometimes the cost associated with this presence in blood, treasure and image, simply isn’t worth it.
To some extent, the challenge Obama faces if he still wants to withdraw from Afghanistan, and there is little reason to believe that he does, is changing the foundations of foreign policy. It would require him telling the generals and other military experts that while he understands that more troops are needed to finish the mission, it still isn’t worth it. Presidents rarely walk away from existing military conflict, whether started by themselves or a predecessor, and by doing so Obama would have sent a signal of change not just to his base of supporters but to the foreign policy establishment in Washington as well. Instead, as in Iraq, Bush’s war will slowly become Obama’s war as the years turn into decades.