

Testimony of Rory Stewart, Senate on Foreign Relations Committee Hearing  
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The Future in Afghanistan

The administration's new policy on Afghanistan has a very narrow focus – counter-terrorism – and a very broad definition of how to achieve it: no less than the fixing of the Afghan state and defeating the Taliban insurgency. President Obama has presented this in a formal argument. The final goal in the region is 'to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future'. A necessary condition of the defeat of al-Qaida is the defeat of the Taliban because 'if the Afghan government falls to the Taliban, that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can.' He, therefore, proposes a counter-insurgency strategy, which includes the deployment of more troops 'to take the fight to the Taliban in the south and the east' and a more comprehensive approach, which aims to 'promote a more capable and accountable Afghan government . . . advance security, opportunity and justice . . . develop an economy that isn't dominated by illicit drugs.'

This policy is rooted in the pre-set categories of counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, state-building and economic development. These categories are so closely linked that policy-makers appear to put them in almost any sequence or combination. You need to defeat the Taliban to build a state and you need to build a state to defeat the Taliban. There cannot be security without development, or development without security. If you have the Taliban you have terrorists, if you don't have development you have terrorists, and as Obama informed the *New Yorker*, 'If you have ungoverned spaces, they become havens for terrorists.' These connections are global: in Obama's words, 'our security and prosperity depend on the security and prosperity of others.' Indeed, at times it seems that all these activities – building a state, defeating the Taliban, defeating al-Qaida and eliminating poverty – are the same activity. The new US army and marine corps counter-insurgency doctrine sounds like a World Bank policy document, replete with commitments to the rule of law, economic development, governance, state-building and human rights. In Obama's words, 'security and humanitarian concerns are all part of one project.'

The fundamental problem with the strategy is that it is trying to do the impossible. It is highly unlikely that the US will be able either to build an effective, legitimate state or to defeat a Taliban insurgency . It needs to find another way of protecting the US against terrorist attack.

We claim to be engaged in a neutral, technocratic, universal project of 'statebuilding' but we don't know exactly what that means. Those who see Afghanistan as reverting to the Taliban or becoming a traditional autocratic state are referring to situations that existed there in 1972 and 1994. But the international community's ambition appears to be to create something that has not existed before. Obama calls it 'a more capable and accountable Afghan

government'. The US, the UK and their allies agreed unanimously at the Nato 60th anniversary summit in April to create 'a stronger democratic state' in Afghanistan.'

Whatever this state is, it could come only from an Afghan national movement, not as a gift from foreigners. As we have seen over the last seven years – and most starkly in the recent election – Afghan government is certainly unlikely in the next five years to reflect US ideas of legitimacy, legal process, civil service function, rights, economic behavior or even broader international assumption about development. Even an aim as modest as 'stability' is highly ambitious. Afghanistan is a mountainous country, with strong traditions of local self-government and autonomy, significant ethnic differences, but strong shared moral values. A centralizing constitution may well be combined with de facto local independence and Afghanistan is starting from a very low base: 30 years of investment might allow its army, police, civil service and economy to approach the levels of Pakistan. And Pakistan clearly still does not have whatever mixture of state-formation, legitimacy, accountability or effectiveness that is apparently necessary to prevent the Taliban and Al Qaeda from operating.

Nor is it clear that even if stronger central institutions were to emerge that they would they assist US national security objectives. Osama bin Laden is still in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. He chooses to be there precisely because Pakistan can be more assertive in its state sovereignty than Afghanistan and restricts US operations. From a narrow (and harsh) US national security perspective, a poor failed state could be easier to handle than a more developed one: Yemen is less threatening than Iran, Somalia than Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan than Pakistan.

Secondly, it is highly unlikely that the US will be able to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan. The ingredients of successful counter-insurgency campaigns in places like Malaya – control of the borders, large numbers of troops in relation to the population, strong support from the majority ethnic groups, a long-term commitment and a credible local government – are lacking in Afghanistan.

Nor is Afghanistan, comparable to Iraq. There are no mass political parties in Afghanistan and the Kabul government lacks the base, strength or legitimacy of the Baghdad government. Afghan tribal groups lack the coherence of the Iraqi Sunni tribes and their relation to state structures: they are not being driven out of neighbourhood after neighbourhood and they do not have the same relation to the Taliban that the Sunni groups had to 'al-Qaida in Iraq'. Afghans are weary of the war but the Afghan chiefs are not approaching us, seeking a deal. Since the political players and state structures in Afghanistan are much more fragile than those in Iraq, they are less likely to play a strong role in ending the insurgency.

A strategy of 'clear, hold and build' seems particularly implausible in Afghanistan. In Iraq – which is a much more urban society – it was possible for US and Iraqi security forces around Baghdad to 'clear and hold' ground because

the geographical area was relatively limited. Afghanistan has an overwhelmingly rural population scattered through an inhospitable terrain, the size of Texas and encompassing perhaps thousand villages. Even a hundred thousand US troops would be far too few to hold or garrison even a fraction of such a vast area. In Iraq, a tradition of strong central government and a much more educated population with an indigenous resource base at least allowed for the possibility of 'building', following the 'clear and hold.' In Afghanistan the lack of the most basic education and capacity and will in governmental structures (and even in the private sector) means that very little of substance could be 'built' during the time that the US and its allies attempted to 'hold'.

Meanwhile, the Taliban can exploit the ideology of religious resistance that the West deliberately fostered in the 1980s to defeat the Russians. They can portray the Kabul government as US slaves, Nato as an infidel occupying force and their own insurgency as a jihad. Their complaints about corruption, human rights abuses and aerial bombardments appeal to a large audience. They are attracting Afghans to their rural courts by giving quicker and more predictable rulings than government judges. They can now easily exploit the corrupt practices in the election to portray the Kabul government as fraudulent and illegitimate. But our inability to inflict a final defeat on the Taliban may not be as dangerous as policy-makers imagine.

If the administration cannot create an effective, stable, legitimate state and cannot defeat a Taliban insurgency it must find another method of protecting US national security and fulfilling our obligations to the Afghan people. And if it is impossible to build a state or defeat the Taliban, there is no point in deploying a hundred thousand troops or spending hundreds of billions of dollars in Afghanistan.

The best Afghan policy would be to reduce the number of foreign troops from the current level of 90,000 to far fewer – perhaps 20,000. In that case, two distinct objectives would remain for the international community: development and counter-terrorism. Neither would amount to the building of an Afghan state or winning a counter-insurgency campaign. A reduction in troop numbers and a turn away from state-building should not mean total withdrawal: good projects could continue to be undertaken in electricity, water, irrigation, health, education, agriculture, rural development and in other areas favoured by development agencies. Even a light US presence could continue to allow for aggressive operations against Al Qaeda terrorists, in Afghanistan, who plan to attack the United States. The US has successfully prevent Al Qaeda from re-establishing itself since 2001 (though the result has only been to move bin Laden across the border.). The US military could also (with other forms of assistance) support the Afghan military to prevent the Taliban from seizing a city or taking over the country.

These twin objectives will require a very long-term presence, as indeed is almost inevitable in a country which is as poor, as fragile and traumatized as Afghanistan

(and which lacks the internal capacity at the moment to become independent of Foreign aid or control its territory). But a long-term presence will in turn mean a much lighter and more limited presence (if it is to retain US domestic support). We should not control and cannot predict the future of Afghanistan. It may in the future become more violent, or find a decentralised equilibrium or a new national unity, but if its communities continue to want to work with us, we can, over 30 years, encourage the more positive trends in Afghan society and help to contain the more negative.

Such a policy can seem strained, unrealistic, counter-intuitive and unappealing. They appear to betray the hopes of Afghans who trusted us and to allow the Taliban to abuse district towns. No politician wants to be perceived to have underestimated, or failed to address, a terrorist threat; or to write off the 'blood and treasure' that we have sunk into Afghanistan; or to admit defeat. Americans are particularly unwilling to believe that problems are insoluble; Obama's motto is not 'no we can't'; soldiers are not trained to admit defeat or to say a mission is impossible. And to suggest that what worked in Iraq won't work in Afghanistan requires a detailed knowledge of each country's past, a bold analysis of the causes of development and a rigorous exposition of the differences, for which few have patience.

The greatest risk of our inflated ambitions and fears, encapsulated in the current surge is that it will achieve the exact opposite of its intentions and in fact precipitate a total withdrawal. The heavier our footprint, and the more costly, the less we are likely to be able to sustain it. Public opinion is already turning against it. Nato allies are mostly staying in Afghanistan simply to please the United States and have little confidence in our objectives or our reasons. Contemporary political culture tends to encourage black and white solutions: either we garrison or we abandon.

While, I strongly oppose troop increases, I equally strongly oppose a total flight. We are currently in danger of lurching from troop increases to withdrawal and from engagement to isolation. We are threatening to provide instant electro-shock therapy followed by abandonment. This is the last thing Afghanistan needs. The international community should aim to provide a patient, tolerant long-term relationship with a country as poor and traumatized as Afghanistan. Judging by comparable countries in the developing world (and Afghanistan is very near the bottom of the UN Human Development index), making Afghanistan more stable, prosperous and humane is a project which will take decades. It is a worthwhile project in the long-term for us and for Afghans but we will only be able to sustain our presence if we massively reduce our investment and our ambitions and begin to approach Afghanistan more as we do other poor countries in the developing world. The best way of avoiding the mistakes of the 1980s and 1990s – the familiar cycle of investment and abandonment which most Afghan expect and fear and which have contributed so much to instability and danger - is to husband and conserve our resources, limit our objectives to counter-terrorism and

humanitarian assistance and work out how to work with fewer troops and less money over a longer period. In Afghanistan in the long-term, less will be more.

About Rory Stewart:

**Rory Stewart**, Ryan Family Professor of the Practice of Human Rights and Director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, studied at Oxford and served briefly in the British army before working in the diplomatic service in Indonesia and as British representative to Montenegro. From 2000 to 2002 he walked 6,000 miles on foot from Turkey to Bangladesh – a journey described in his *New York Times* bestseller, *The Places in Between*. In 2003, he was appointed as the Coalition Provisional Authority deputy governor of two provinces in Southern Iraq, a period described in his second book, *The Prince of the Marshes*. He has presented BBC documentaries, been a visiting columnist for the *New York Times* and written extensively on intervention. In 2005, he moved to Afghanistan where he founded the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, an NGO dedicated to Afghan traditional crafts and the regeneration of the historic commercial center of Kabul.