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Alarm in Afghanistan

By Nasrine Gross | February 2, 2006

FOR AFGHANS, the United States is the deciding factor in their recovery from a failed state, from the nightmare of becoming a breeding ground for terrorists, and from living in a culture of war and misery.

Afghans perceive the impending drawdown of US military forces and cutback of economic assistance with alarm and misgiving. They think Afghanistan is like a patient who in a single operation had successful heart, lung, and liver transplants, and should be in the recovery room, not out on the sidewalk.

The impact of the drawdown of US forces is that it may embolden enemies into more action. The enemies of Afghanistan consider this pullback a victory. Just look at all the daily episodes of fighting between the coalition forces, including the Afghan National Army and the Taliban and Al Qaeda, many of which do not get news coverage in the United States unless they involve an American.

As a result of the continued Taliban attacks, Afghanistan will continue to be divided into two areas -- the provinces where Taliban forces are active and the rest of the country, which will further prevent Afghans from reconnecting with each other. With extremists holding seats in Parliament, they may try to reintroduce laws curtailing democratic rights and prevent needed legislation such as confirmation of female judges to the Supreme Court. Prodemocracy groups will not have the stature to defend their interests robustly. And since the US-Afghan strategic agreement did not set well with some countries in the region, most notably Pakistan, these countries will freely encourage the Taliban and Al Qaeda to further destabilize the fledgling state.

On the economic assistance cutback from \$1 billion to \$630 million per year, many Afghans think it means one of two things: Either the United States is hard pressed for \$370 million or the United States is sending an unmistakable sign of ending its involvement in Afghanistan. Because of the bitter memories of an earlier US disengagement after the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan, guess which one of these two ideas they more readily believe? And among all the reconstruction groups in the country, there are jitters that their projects will be seriously impacted.

The perception of this dual drawdown must be alleviated. The US secretary of state's participation in the recent London Conference is a good thing, but not enough. It will take many more gestures and actions from the United States to reassure Afghans, and to provide a surefire signal to the enemies that America means business.

The idea that the Taliban works to further the interests of the Pashtuns of Afghanistan must be countered. The Taliban is not an indigenous Afghan movement; rather it is an import of foreign countries and extremist groups from many parts of the world that abuse, in a clever way, the Pashtunwali traits, such as the code of silence and others. We need to help the Pashtuns of these provinces understand they do not owe the Taliban and Al Qaeda anything -- no loyalty, no code of silence.

We need to make the provinces where the Taliban and Al Qaeda operate more accessible to all Afghans, so the local population can develop a vested interest in keeping up security rather than be prey to the enemies' machinations.

The US government and public should become more aware that Afghanistan is the front line in the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. They must not leave the rehabilitation of Afghanistan unfinished.

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