

Published in the Washington Times on June 16, 2011

President Obama is expected to decide soon on the first phase of a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Regardless of the number of troops coming home, the president's decision marks an important point in the Afghan mission.

After almost 10 years, progress continues, but it remains painstakingly slow. What might have seemed like good strategy years or even months ago is not showing the level of success that justifies continuing the mission with such a large troop presence. The time has come for a change in strategy that begins with a departure from nation-building and counterinsurgency operations -- the centerpiece of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan since Mr. Obama took office.

Since 2002, more than \$18 billion in civilian aid for nation-building projects has been sent to Afghanistan by U.S. taxpayers. This is more than \$300 million a month for the development of a country and government replete with corruption, complete absence of Western rule of law and seemingly committed to upholding the status quo, no matter what the ramifications.

The return on this decade of investment has been an overwhelming dependency on the United States and other contributing nations. According to the World Bank, 97 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product comes from foreign development and military spending. With just 3 percent of its economy homegrown, there is no incentive, no encouragement and absolutely no reason for the Afghans to do their part. Everything is done for them.

Even with the eventual drawdown of U.S. combat troops, the number of State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development workers is expected to increase to 1,450 over the next several years. Evidently, nation-building still would be a priority. What this says to the Afghan people and their government leaders is that, absent a large military presence, the flow of U.S. dollars will go unchanged.

Also worth re-examining is the overemphasis on counterinsurgency operations, which incorporate elements of economic and social development with military strategy. If anything, such heavy emphasis on counterinsurgency has moved attention and resources away from

some of the more pressing security objectives, including the maturation of military and police forces and the necessity for Afghanistan to stand on its own. Counterinsurgency worked in Iraq for many reasons and possibly would work in Afghanistan if sustained for decades.

Counterterrorism is a strategy that not only takes the fight directly to the enemy, but also accelerates security improvements while allowing self-initiated political developments to build momentum. It makes sense, and it can happen with a much smaller footprint, relying instead on the speed and efficiency of special operations forces, along with the power of air assets and other resources to ensure ground combat troops hold their advantage.

There can be no understating the importance of maintaining a foothold in the region for reasons related to American and global security. The time eventually might come for a full and complete withdrawal, but it's most certainly not a logical or appropriate choice now or in the foreseeable future. It's also necessary to stay mindful of Pakistan, including its role in the Afghan mission and other factors that could affect regional stability.

There are still options for Afghanistan. A drawdown is certain, but a change in mission strategy -- moving away from nation-building and counterinsurgency and instead focusing more on counterterrorism operations -- would produce long-overdue security gains that are sustainable over time.

Helping the Afghan people create a Jeffersonian democracy is a laudable goal. However, given the apathy of a large portion of the Afghan people, it may be a bridge too far.