President Barack Obama's strategy in Afghanistan does not pass the tests for war that he offered in his Nobel Lecture. Afghanistan is being preyed upon by a limited insurgency that feeds on Afghanistan's poverty and desperation. Most Afghans do not support the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, but are vulnerable to their pressures. Young unemployed men often join militant factions out of the need to earn a meager income to eat and feed their families. In these circumstances, the fight against poverty should be dominant in the fight against terror and instability. Yet Obama's policy in Afghanistan almost completely neglects the strategy of economic development, and relies almost entirely on the military.

Fighting poverty would obviate the need for extra US troops, and would pave the way for a drawdown of troops. The US military already vastly outnumbers Al-Qaeda and the Taliban insurgents. The problem is that extreme poverty overwhelms the fragile social fabric of the countryside. Afghanistan will remain unstable and vulnerable until this poverty is addressed. Obama acknowledged such realities in the Nobel Lecture by declaring that «a just peace. . . must encompass economic security and opportunity. For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want.» Yet the war policy fails to act on this insight.

Obama has hardly mentioned Afghanistan’s poverty in his recent speeches and deliberations. He has not announced or unveiled a development strategy. He has no experts on development among his war counselors, despite the fact that Afghanistan is one of the very poorest countries in the world (ranking 181th out of 182 in the UN's Human Development Index). Child mortality, at 235 deaths per 1,000 births according to the UN, is staggering, easily one of the highest rates in the world. Has anybody in the Administration focused on these basic realities and their implications for instability?

We will spend around $100 billion in 2010 on the military approach compared with just $2 billion or so on economic development in Afghanistan, a 50-to-1 ratio. If we raised the development budget to even $10 billion, and deployed it thoughtfully and consistently, the benefits for the Afghan people would be so strong that we could avoid the surge altogether, save $40 billion, and could quickly reduce the current level of military spending, saving even more money and lives, Afghan and American. Our existing troops would be more than sufficient to protect the development activities because the communities themselves would also strongly defend themselves and their economic gains. Indeed, with stronger and reinvigorated local communities, we could quickly and safely turn security efforts over to the Afghan people themselves.

So why do we ignore this more peaceful and less expensive path? Our country has relied so heavily on the military for so long - and despite so many failures by now -- that the public has completely lost the confidence, spirit, programs, memory and even human interest of fighting poverty as a strategy of consolidating stability and national security. The war industry, a mega-business out of all proportion to the miniscule «peace industry» composed mainly of NGOs, completely dominates the lobbying scene. The public opposes «wasting» a few billion dollars to help impoverished people, yet then supports wasting tens of billions of dollars on a military approach destined to fail.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeffrey-sachs/obamas-nobel-lecture-and_b_390820.html
Jeffrey Sachs: A Better Strategy for Afghanistan

The extreme skepticism over development is based on often-repeated myths rather than actual experience. There are countless development successes, yet often at modest scale because of the limited funding behind them. These successes are based on local development initiatives that bypass the corruption in Kabul (and the corrupt contractors lobbying in Washington). In rural societies like Afghanistan, development takes place in local villages and towns. That’s where the efforts should be focused, not on illusory «anti-corruption» campaigns in the capital city.

A recent New York Times story (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/13/world/asia/13jurm.html?_r=1&scp=6&sq=Afghanistan%20villages%20&st=cse) reported on such successful efforts in rural Afghanistan, with the right ingredients, but as usual at too small a scale (because of limited funding). Here’s what the New York Times reported.

In the village of Jurm, «People here have taken charge for themselves -- using village councils and direct grants as part of an initiative called the National Solidarity Program, introduced by an Afghan ministry in 2003. Before then, this valley had no electricity or clean water, its main crop was poppy and nearly one in 10 women died in childbirth, one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. Today, many people have water taps, fields grow wheat and it is no longer considered shameful for a woman to go to a doctor . . . Local residents contend that the councils work because they take development down to its most basic level, with villagers directing the spending to improve their own lives, cutting out middle men, local and foreign, as well as much of the overhead costs and corruption. ‘You don’t steal from yourself,’ was how Ataullah, a farmer in Jurm who uses one name, described it.»

Meaningful economic progress in Afghanistan villages could be achieved at around $100 per villager per year, meaning that the annual cost of stationing one soldier -- $1 million -- could instead support annual economic development of a community of perhaps 10,000 people. Even at $200 per villager, we’d still reach 5,000 people. That’s right, the approximate trade-off is meaningful help for an entire village versus stationing one more US soldier. Extrapolating, we could easily help all of Afghanistan’s villages with plenty more left over for the big-ticket infrastructure -- local roads, highways, power, and connectivity - all for a small fraction of the cost of the surge. Of course, I am presupposing that we adopt a delivery system relying on local services and construction, and not putting the money through the hugely overpriced US mega-contractors.

The truth is that our government is geared to expanded war while disdaining or utterly neglecting the opportunities through non-military approaches. Those are viewed as soft, naïve, and «for them,» while war is viewed as hardheaded and «for us.» The tragedy is that war is breaking our economy and society, while attention to economic development and poverty reduction might just help to solve some deeper crucial problems in the world, including US national security.

For more commentary come to the State of the Planet blog.

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