

Victory in Afghanistan through Empowerment, Not Force

Written by Mike Honda

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Earlier this week, President Obama outlined his plans for how the United States should proceed with the war in Afghanistan. In his speech, the President ordered a large increase of American troops and a flexible withdrawal timeline set for mid-2011. I have previously commended the President for doing his due diligence and taking the time necessary to assess all possible avenues of engagement rather than rushing to make a decision. I still strongly believe, however, that before committing any additional troops, we must first measure the effectiveness of the US mission in building peace and stability in Afghanistan. We will continue to fall short of this goal as long as the country's political, economic, and social needs remain unmet.

In my role as the Afghanistan Taskforce Chair in the Congressional Progressive Caucus, I have suggested an 80-20 roadmap that commits 80% of US funding toward building Afghanistan's infrastructure and governance, with 20% of funding directed towards security. As evidenced by the last eight years, we will not win by force alone. Afghanistan is a country very much on the brink. Its government recently ranked as the second most corrupt in the world, according to a November report by Transparency International. Its newborns face the second most unhealthy and unstable environment next to Somalia. Its utilities, roadways, and police force are unreliable, lawless, and underfunded. All of this has occurred despite billions of US dollars and constant military involvement. For the cost of a U.S. soldier, at \$1 million a year, one could train and pay several hundred Afghan soldiers. This fact becomes especially poignant when one takes into consideration that only 30 cents of every foreign military dollar stays in Afghanistan.

It is only through the empowerment of the people of Afghanistan that we can achieve victory. Last month, I [wrote about](#) the National Solidarity Program (NSP) in the Washington Times. Operated out of the Afghanistan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, the NSP model has touched all 34 of the country's provinces. At the center of the NSP are democratically elected, mixed-gender Community Development Councils (CDC) which work with members of the community to identify, manage, and monitor development projects and resources. The CDCs are helping to empower citizens and rebuild the country. One water project built by the NSP model, for example, has opened up drinking-water access for four villages, ameliorating a two-hour walk for water and reducing tensions between villagers who had poached supplies. A health care project, designed by female CDC members, built a medical clinic for women and children - providing health services access to 50,000 residents. Without the waste (of every

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foreign aid dollar entering Afghanistan only \$0.10 stays in the country) it is estimated that the NSP could complete 20,000 small projects for just \$200 million.

Finally, if any additional funding for Afghanistan is committed, regardless of one's position on the war, we must ensure that it is paid for – not only by our military families, but as a shared sacrifice of us all. This kind of empowerment combined with clear timelines for troop withdrawal will send a message that we are serious about ensuring Afghan sovereignty and independence.