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U.S. in 'nation-building,' like it or not

Washington avoids the term, experts call it inevitable

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WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has repeatedly declared it will not participate in a peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan. The State Department has vowed that the United States will not get mixed in the process of reconstructing the Afghan state. Everyone in the government, from President Bush on down, has labored carefully to avoid using the label "nation-building" in any sense connected with Afghanistan.

"It's an open secret here, a loaded term of diplomatic, military analysis and congressional use, that nation-building is precisely what the United States must do to bring the war-ravaged country if the Bush administration hopes to keep Afghanistan free of terrorism."

The U.S. will have to maintain significant military presence in Afghanistan after the primary war aims of expelling the Taliban and crushing Al Qaeda and its leaders have been accomplished, many analysts contend. American troops should provide a security umbrella for the international peacekeeping forces that is being assembled, they say.

The Bush administration has promised significant, though so far unspecified, contributions to the cost of Afghanistan's reconstruction, estimated to total more than \$1 billion. Additional American diplomatic and political efforts will be required to bolster the fledgling Afghan interim government and protect it from destabilization by neighboring countries that have long meddled in Afghan affairs.

Ghost of Somalia

All of that effectively amounts to nation-building, a toxic political concept in Washington tainted by bitter memories of the American entanglement in Somalia during the 1990s. There, when 27 American soldiers were killed while fighting against hostile warlords.

"Look, anyone with half a brain knows that what is involved in Afghanistan is nation-building," said a senior staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "The question is whether we are ready to do it."

Bush has said repeatedly that the United States is not involved in nation-building, although having campaigned vigorously against nation-building, he pointedly avoids using those words.

"America and our allies will not part in the rebuilding of Afghanistan," Bush said last week at a signing ceremony for a bill that dispatches relief funds for Afghan women and children. "We learned our lesson."



AP Photo/Thomas H. Moore

An Afghan passes for prayer on a road outside Kabul, along which bullet-riddled remnants of a car are visible. Some experts say order is nearly impossible in Afghanistan.

Experts say the difficulty is that the mission—particularly the military aspect of it—will not be completed by the time popular American support for it has faded. There is some Afghan support for a United Nations peacekeeping force, which will not be a violence script, experts say. Yet despite its pretensions to the contrary, the U.S. will almost certainly have a role in the peacekeeping effort, a possibility alluded to by a top State Department official during testimony Dec. 8 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"The bulk of the contributions to the peacekeeping force will come from capable countries on the outside," said Richard Haass, director for policy planning. "The United States will consider taking on a modest role to help stabilize such a force—to facilitate it."

At a meeting in London on Sunday with Hamid Karzai, the new Afghan interim prime minister, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said that the U.S. wants "to be as helpful as we can" in restoring stability to Afghanistan. The U.S. will provide intelligence and air support for the peacekeeping force, Rumsfeld said, as well as a rapid reaction force in case of trouble.

U.S. a hidden sledgehammer

Such a force could be brought to contribute what peacekeeping expert David Kilgallon calls an enduring "cover-the-horizon threat," meaning a significant U.S. military force stationed near Afghanistan, quickly on ships, and available to intervene with overwhelming power should the peacekeepers encounter serious opposition.

"The hope is that the warheads will revert to being responsible civil authorities," said Markos Ferrer, Canadian ambassador to the United Nations and president of the International Peace Academy. "But there's quite a stretch of course."

The credible threat of American force will be especially important, Kilgallon contends, because the 1,000 peacekeepers in Bosnia Herzegovina in the mid-1990s, by comparison, more than 60,000 international troops were necessary to secure the peace, in a country only one-third Afghanistan's size.

It is also time for the United States to convert the ghosts of Somalia, experts argue, and revise the presumed lesson that failed states are deathtraps to be avoided.

"In Somalia, the level of American interests there was never clear," said Lee Feinstein, a former Defense Department peacekeeping expert and State Department official. "In Afghanistan, we don't have that problem. We see the very clear connection between disorder and terrorism. People really do understand that the lack of working institutions in Afghanistan is a direct threat to U.S. national security."

Nor is nation-building such a dirty word, Feinstein added. "The truth is that nation-building is fact in every military campaign," he said. "After the fighting stops, there's always a requirement to rebuild to consolidate order."

Order a rare word

Few Afghan observers expect a restoration of order that rare, it is believed.

"Once significant aid starts flowing into Afghanistan, people are going to start shooting each other," said a senior European diplomat. "Developments on the ground will lead the United States to change its position on peacekeeping. The U.S. will have to take some responsibility for the protection of the peacekeepers."

The U.S. has been adamant in its refusal to take part in an international peacekeeping force, to be led by Britain, that could number 1,000 soldiers, contending that the U.S. has already made an enormous military contribution to Afghanistan's liberation from the Taliban's rule. In fact, the Pentagon has only reluctantly agreed to allow a U.S. peacekeeping force in all, concerned that its presence could hamper the war effort against Al Qaeda.

Peacekeeping firepower

The United Nations Security Council is still laboring to work out details of a resolution authorizing the peacekeeping force.

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