

Sovereignty vs. Security ^[1]

Public opinion is often hard to measure, but it's a safe bet that assaults on a country's sovereignty — real or perceived — can quickly inflame that nation's public opinion. We see it in a whole range of issues this summer, from the health reform debate in the United States, where opponents raise the specter of millions of illegal immigrants crossing the border to get free health care, to the existential struggles of governments in Baghdad, Kabul and Islamabad, who lose credibility with their own people every time an outside power (the United States) takes responsibility for their security.

This week's bombings by insurgents in Baghdad illustrate the point. They yielded the highest civilian death toll since American forces withdrew to their bases. According to reports, American and Iraqi military agree that the Iraqis are not yet up to the task of protecting their own civilian population, but the U.S.-Iraqi agreement on U.S. withdrawal was essential to the credibility of the al-Maliki government with its own people. So the American forces stay on their bases.

America's drone bombings in Pakistan — the latest just yesterday — represent another Hobson's choice. It seems clear that without them, Taliban and other anti-Islamabad forces would become stronger and be an even greater threat to this large, unruly, nuclear-weaponed state. Indeed, the drones have decapitated at least part of the al-Qaeda leadership. However, these very strikes diminish the government's credibility with its own people, since they are seen as a violation of Pakistani sovereignty. When innocent civilians are killed, Pakistan claims the attacks are America's idea.

America has been in this situation before and the end game is always messy. Hamid Karsai probably won re-election yesterday in Afghanistan to a second five-year term, and while the fact of the election is excellent news, we should not interpret it as a sign of public enthusiasm. Public opinion throughout southwest Asia is liable to choose local sovereignty (however insecure and unfree) over security achieved with outside help. As for the American public, President Obama yesterday made the point that the money being spent on the military engagement in Southwest Asia would be enough to pay for his health reform plan:

...we're talking about \$100 billion a year — which is still a significant amount of money — but just to give you a sense of perspective, I mean, the amount of money that we're spending in Iraq and Afghanistan is...\$8 billion to \$9 billion a month, right? So for about the same cost per year as we've been spending over the last five to six years, we could have funded this health care reform proposal — just to give you a sense of perspective.

Many in the audience probably thought this would be a better way to spend the money.

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