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Why Are Americans Still Targets in Afghanistan?

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Why are Americans still deployed in Afghanistan, targets of the Taliban, ISIS, treacherous government soldiers and police, and maybe even Russia? After nearly two decades of fruitless combat, Washington's job is done.

The Taliban just staged a massive attack on an Afghan intelligence agency compound in Aybak, the capital of Samangan province. A local councilman told the *Washington Post* that the Taliban is "stronger than any time in the past 20 years." America's attempt at nation-building has failed.

The Trump administration has withdrawn about 8,000 U.S. personnel, but the Pentagon says it plans to keep some 4,000 on station past election day. It is time to bring everyone home. Now.

The claim that Moscow paid bounties to kill Americans in Afghanistan has roiled Washington. However, there are many reasons to doubt the charge, including the difficulty in distinguishing payments for resisting the U.S., which typically means killing Americans, and payments for killing Americans.

Moreover, it's a dramatic case of the pot calling the kettle black. The U.S. contributed to the Soviet death toll of 15,000 in Afghanistan by arming the Mujahedeen for the express purpose of killing Soviet soldiers. The U.S. trained and armed Ukraine's military for the express purpose of killing Russian soldiers and allied ethnic-Russian irregulars. The U.S. trained and armed Syrian insurgents for the express purpose of killing Syrian soldiers. Yet Washington policymakers purport to be shocked, shocked that Moscow might be paying Afghans to kill Americans?

The more important question, however, is: what are Americans still doing in Afghanistan?

The analysis of any geopolitical issue should begin by looking at a map. Afghanistan is in Central Asia. Its neighbors include Iran, China, and Pakistan. Russia is nearby. Afghanistan doesn't matter to the U.S. In terms of geography, it is the definition of irrelevant. If the issue is regional stability and peace, Afghanistan doesn't concern America. The stability and peace being discussed aren't anywhere near America.

Bizarrely, some have contended that the U.S. should stay lest Afghanistan's neighbors end up at odds over that nation's future. However, they have the most at stake in Kabul's future. They should pay the price for trying to fix the country. The U.S. attempt to impose a solution has sacrificed American lives and wealth for nothing, at least nothing that benefits this nation, and resulted in nothing sustainable once Washington leaves, which is inevitable.

Humanitarian concerns also are advanced for staying in Afghanistan. Of course, it would be wonderful to create a liberal democracy based on Western values in Central Asia. It also is a fool's errand. Such a system must evolve, supported by popular attitudes and civil society institutions. The U.S. has not been able to forcibly implant them over the last 19 years.

Washington hasn't even been able to create a functioning democracy capable of deciding an election winner.

Moreover, the world is filled with similarly worthy targets for international social work. Where to start? By this measure, virtually every nation in the Middle East should be occupied and recreated. As well as most of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors. And many African nations. Some states in Southeast Asia. And even a few European and South American countries. However worthy, humanitarian objectives cannot warrant endlessly sacrificing the interests and especially lives of Americans.

Nor is there any security justification for the U.S. to forever fight to preserve a de facto empire reaching into Central Asia. Afghanistan mattered in 2001 because it hosted terrorist training camps, courtesy al-Qaeda, which launched devastating terrorist assaults on America. It was important for Washington to disrupt or destroy that group and punish the government which had hosted the terrorists. Both objectives were quickly achieved.

Today the country is irrelevant to U.S. security. Some war-forever advocates warn that if the U.S. does not fight endless wars around the world terrorists will be soon overrun America. This argument is stupid even by Washington standards.

The Taliban does not threaten and never has threatened the U.S. It is unlikely to host another group intent on attacking the U.S. A repeat performance would guarantee devastating retaliation. Washington need not reoccupy the entire country. The Taliban are evil, not stupid. They might believe their cause is worth fighting for, but that doesn't mean they want to fight America again and again.

More important, al-Qaeda doesn't need Afghanistan for operations: none of the 9/11 plotters resided in that country and the group's leader, Osama bin Laden, ended up next door in Pakistan, almost certainly with the knowledge of that government, a supposed U.S. ally. Regional affiliates and copycats located elsewhere long ago took over al-Qaeda operations.

So it is with other groups: there are plenty of ungoverned or weakly controlled spaces in which terrorists can operate. As for ISIS, so far it has been busy mostly fighting over territory, not attacking the U.S., and in Afghanistan is opposed by the Taliban. To the extent that Afghanistan's neighbors get more involved in America's absence, the amount of space for terrorists will shrink and pressure on ill actors will increase.

Which leaves emotionally appealing but highly foolish arguments. The U.S. must stay to demonstrate "resolve" to potential adversaries. Actually, states hostile to America are more likely to respect a country that sets priorities, exercises judgment, and practices prudence. Washington faces one potential peer competitor, China. What would impress Beijing more: America spending another two decades wasting money and lives fighting a fruitless war over nothing important in Afghanistan, or withdrawing in order to conserve economic resources, strengthen popular unity, and focus on Asia? Xi Jinping heads the cheerleading squad for Washington's endless wars in Central Asia and the Middle East.

The most emotionally charged argument is that the U.S. must not stop fighting, apparently ever, so that those who have died will not have done so in vain. But it's too late. They did die in vain—in pursuit of a mission that was not, is not, and never will be worth fighting. Of course, they are not to blame. Three successive presidents sacrificed American lives for no good reason.

Indeed, Barack Obama and Donald Trump kept troops fighting mostly to appease hawks who would criticize anyone who halted America's participation in the war. But making Americans fight and die for the latest administration's political benefit is an abomination.

Continuing the war will redeem no one's life. The best way to honor those who have died is to stop needlessly sacrificing American lives. Even a majority of Afghan war veterans say it is time for the U.S. to leave. Policymakers who most fervently insist that the war go on rarely volunteer to go themselves. Rather, they insist that others carry on the fight.

On almost every measure the situation in Afghanistan continues to worsen. Amount of the country under Taliban control or in which control is contested. Numbers of government security personnel. Attrition rates. Military and civilian casualties. Defections to the Taliban. Insurgent attacks. Security in cities, including Kabul. The last may be the most devastating metric. When I visited Afghanistan's capital, twice, around a decade ago, we repeatedly drove to and from the airport. Today the U.S. embassy sends its personnel to the airport via helicopter. So much for the safety of Americans in a conflict that U.S. generals publicly call a "stalemate."

About the only thing on the increase is official spin, and that is putting it politely. The *Washington Post* published "The Afghanistan Papers" last year, which offered a devastating indictment of official mendacity regarding Afghanistan. The conclusion: "U.S. officials constantly said they were making progress. They were not, and they knew it."

John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, spoke of "an odor of ... mendacity and hubris" surrounding the issue. And the lies continue. Warned Andrew Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies last year: "official U.S. and Afghan data seem to sharply understate the level of growing threat presence, influence, and control."

Now comes the claim that Russia has been aiding the Taliban. Moscow once backed American efforts in Afghanistan, even providing important logistical support. No longer, however. The Putin government apparently has been sending arms to the insurgents for some time. Financial assistance, however structured, would not, or at least should not, surprise anyone, though the latest charge remains unproved. It would be awful if true, but Washington can ill complain after treating Russia as an enemy, including sanctioning its economy and providing tank-killing Javelin missiles to Ukraine. The issue reinforces the necessity of serious negotiations with Moscow over rescuing the relationship from a Cold War revival that would be in neither nation's interest.

Even more important, though, is the importance of withdrawing Americans from conflicts where they are vulnerable to attack from great powers out for revenge as well as highly-motivated and resilient insurgents unwilling to yield. Arrogant, foolish, militaristic U.S. administrations have helped make the world dangerous for Americans, including those in uniform.

Candidate Trump got Afghanistan right: "We should have a speedy withdrawal. Why should we keep wasting our money—rebuild the U.S.!" So why are U.S. personnel still fighting in Afghanistan? He's been president for 42 months. Why should voters take his future promises seriously if he can't deliver on such an important one?

It's well past time to bring the American military home from Afghanistan.

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