

## Let Someone Else Worry About Central Asia

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May 6, 2021

America is leaving Afghanistan after two decades. Washington is in an uproar. The bipartisan War Party is shocked and appalled. It worries that Al Qaeda will soon be conquering American cities. And the whole world will be at risk. A new Dark Age will threaten globally. All because President Joe Biden doesn't want to spend decades more at war in Central Asia.

It is not just neoconservatives and their credulous progressive allies who believe that every war should be permanent. So, too, the obedient media. The *Washington Post* is the company newsletter for the Washington, D.C., establishment. Its foreign policy stance is essentially "the more wars—and, especially, the longer the wars—the better."

The *Post* naturally expressed horror at the possibility that Americans would no longer be fighting in what is colloquially known as Pashtunistan. Complained the paper, the president "has chosen the easy way out of Afghanistan, but the consequences are likely to be ugly." Only a charter member of the War Party, which expects other people to do the fighting, could believe that endless war is better than dropping a conflict so distant from the interests of the American people.

Scripture tells us that God is concerned when even a single sparrow falls to earth. The War Party takes a similar position whenever any country anywhere on earth has a problem, no matter how minor. America must get involved. Otherwise the planet's future will be in doubt.

Last week we were warned that Central Asia is at risk at the very moment the U.S. is leaving Afghanistan. The *New York Times* ran a story headlined: "Central Asian Border Dispute Casts Shadow Over U.S. Afghan Departure."

Afghanistan wasn't involved, but no matter. Reported the *Times*: "Fighting broke out on Thursday between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over control of an irrigation canal and an access road to an ethnic enclave, raising the specter of instability in Central Asia as the United States prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan."

No doubt, in the abstract this is bad news. Two score people were killed and another couple hundred were injured. Although the two governments quickly declared a ceasefire, combat could flare again, fueled by the disputed status of ethnic enclaves—similar to the issue that triggered

last fall's ferocious fight between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Neither Bishkek nor Dushanbe is much of a military power, but the conflict could intensify and spread.

Although tragic, how does the Tajik-Kyrgyz imbroglio affect America? The *Times* was almost breathless in warning: "Though the area is far from the Afghan border and main routes out of Afghanistan, the hostilities come at a delicate time for the United States. In the early stages of the Afghan war, the United States opened two bases in Central Asia to move troops into Afghanistan, and transported everything from fuel to food on an overland route through the region and into the war zone. Central Asia today provides an alternative to Pakistan as an overland route for moving equipment out of Afghanistan as the Biden administration has vowed a complete withdrawal by September."

Yet Biden is about to put this all into the past. Departing will leave the U.S. less vulnerable to the vagaries of geopolitics thousands of miles away. Nothing that happens there will have much impact on America. The region, dominated by oppressive states that spent their histories as part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, never had much contact with the U.S. and never was of much commercial, cultural, or political importance to America.

Afghanistan impinged on America only because Washington went there. After the Soviets invaded in December 1979 the Carter administration confronted Moscow. The Reagan administration worked even harder to bloody the USSR. However, this effort greatly increased the influence of radical jihadists, such as Osama bin Laden, who moved to Afghanistan to battle the Red Army. When the Soviets left Washington departed as well. Bin Laden and 9/11 made Afghanistan again matter, but only briefly. Kabul's importance ended after the U.S. quickly ousted the Taliban and busted Al Qaeda. At that point Washington could have announced "mission accomplished" and left.

Instead, the Bush administration embarked upon a futile nation-building program. Since the Biden administration has dropped this fantasy objective, the U.S. no longer need worry about Afghanistan—the Taliban wants to rule at home, not venture abroad in search of Americans to kill. Members of Al Qaeda might have a greater interest in doing the latter, but Afghanistan holds no special advantages for terrorists and the Taliban has no desire to bring down America's wrath again. Anyway, there are plenty of other ungoverned or badly governed spaces where Al Qaeda affiliates already are active.

Distance is but a small aspect of Central Asia's geopolitical irrelevance to America. Anything that happens there which is likely to bother Washington is likely to have greater impact on Afghanistan's neighbors, which therefore will have commensurately greater incentive to address any problems. The region is bounded by Russia, China, Iran, India, and Pakistan. This group includes a former superpower and an emerging superpower. Four nuclear powers and one potential nuclear state. Even better, three are adversaries to varying degrees, excellent repositories for the Afghan problem.

The best thing the U.S. can do is to get out.

The truest endorsement of Biden's decision comes from the Russians, who seem disappointed at America's departure. They prefer that Washington persist at the unenviable task of trying to stabilize Afghanistan, In their view, far better that America stupidly waste thousands of lives and

trillions of dollars on a country and region of little interest to Washington than that Moscow be forced to intervene again.

The point is not that all these countries have the same interests—India and Pakistan are bitter adversaries. Russia worries about being pushed out commercially in an area that it once ruled by China. Still, none of these nations benefit from open warfare in Afghanistan or terrorist attacks originating within, and especially ones targeting America, which could spur renewed U.S. military strikes. All prefer rough stability and will have an incentive to promote that end once Washington leaves.

The answer to “what happened?” overseas often is interesting, as in the Tajik-Kyrgyz clash. However, far more important for any American foreign policy analyst is “so what?” Only that answer indicates whether the U.S. government need act. In this case, yet another conflict far from America barely rates a “whatever.” Washington should continue withdrawing U.S. personnel from Afghanistan. The sooner the pullout is complete, the quicker Central Asia will disappear as a matter of serious American concern.

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