

The American Conservative

Not Everything On Earth Is A Vital Interest For America

Doug Bandow

July 1, 2021

Washington policymakers spend much of their time on the frivolous. Especially when it comes to foreign policy.

American officials and diplomats constantly circle the globe issuing statements, making demands, proposing initiatives, and otherwise bothering people to little effect. Most of these efforts are harmless, and often provide a politically advantageous image of international activity and influence for home consumption.

More malign, however, are forceful interventions in other countries. In some cases Washington spends years, even decades, attempting to impoverish and starve other peoples, as in Cuba, into submission. The U.S. also engages in endless wars, as so often in the Middle East.

The human and resource costs of such actions are high, often tragically so. Yet the resulting benefits often are impossible to discern. For instance, some 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam, supposedly to prevent communist hordes from conquering Southeast Asia. Less than two decades after the humiliating U.S. withdrawal, the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact were gone, Maoism had disappeared from China, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge had been ousted, Vietnam's communist regime had battled China's communist regime, and Hanoi was moving toward rapprochement with America.

Even more mysterious is the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, now finally set to end after two decades of war. The initial intervention had a serious purpose—destroy Al Qaeda and punish the Taliban. That was achieved within months, if not weeks. Then Washington spent the succeeding years attempting to impose Western-style democracy on Afghanistan, which always had been ruled tribally at the village and valley level. Thousands of lives and trillions of dollars later, Americans are finally going home.

For years both commitments were presented as somehow “vital,” warranting endless wars thousands of miles from home. An equally endless number of op-eds were written, television interviews taped, and arguments advanced warning of disaster and tragedy if Americans did not battle on forever, if necessary. Similar claims, though of even less credibility, are being advanced on behalf of U.S. deployments in Iraq and Syria. In these cases a few thousand or even hundred American military personnel supposedly are all that stand between utopia and the abyss.

New candidates for the next “vital interest” are constantly offered. There probably is no spot on earth that some analyst, journalist, or official has not at one point or another insisted was vital for American security. Imagine the dire threat if China dominated, say, Fiji! Washington’s Pacific presence would be at risk, Hawaii would be on the precipice, and San Diego would be under threat! Thus, it would be time to sign a “mutual defense treaty” with Fiji, establish an American base, deploy troops, and make clear that the island nation was part of the sacred U.S. defense perimeter. Let Beijing be warned! And so it goes.

At least Fiji is merely a possibility. Last week the Hudson Institute’s Walter Mead used his *Wall Street Journal* column to make the case for Americans doing something about the Caucasus. He observed:

The Caucasus is one of those complicated faraway but strategically vital regions that Americans often overlook. It’s the only exit oil and gas can take from Central Asia to the West without passing through Russian or Iranian territory. Since the former Soviet republics of the southern Caucasus declared their independence in 1990, there have been numerous conflicts in Georgia, two in Russia’s restive Chechen region, and two between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is largely populated by ethnic Armenians but internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.

Vital it might be, but precisely to whom? The U.S. has interests everywhere, but that doesn’t mean they are important, let alone vital. And the fact that Washington has some interests everywhere doesn’t mean it must assert or even protect them all.

Such is the Caucasus. Mead plays up the region’s significance:

Caucasian conflicts can have an outsize impact on world order. In 1999 the second Chechen war helped Vladimir Putin assume firm control of the Russian Federation. His 2008 invasion of Georgia marked the beginning of a Russian challenge to the post-Cold War international order. The recent Nagorno-Karabakh war, in which Azerbaijani forces equipped with Turkish and Israeli drones imposed a stinging setback on Armenia’s Russian-supplied army, also marks a shift in world politics as high-tech drone warfare becomes a factor in small-power conflicts.

That is all true, but strikingly irrelevant to America. Chechnya, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were all part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, and as such received minimal attention from Washington. Chechnya remains part of Russia today. The other three have been free only the last three decades, and their travails have had minimal impact on America. If they pose a danger to the U.S., it is by threatening to suck America into their wars.

Indeed, Mead’s description indicates their much greater importance to other nations. In this case geography is king, followed by history. Chechnya was a brutal conflict within Russia which spun off terrorist attacks elsewhere in the latter, including in Moscow. The Armenia-Azerbaijan battle was hot as the Soviet Union collapsed; the former’s Nagorno-Karabakh grab was unsustainable and set off round two last fall. And that fight drew in Russia, Turkey, and Israel.

What should Washington do in such a geopolitical imbroglio? Mead argued that “the problem for U.S. political types engaged in Caucasus policy is that American values and American interests can pull Washington in different directions.” That is true, in the sense that Armenia is more democratic and enjoys much greater domestic political support, especially from the active Armenian diaspora. In contrast, Azerbaijan is the more significant nation geopolitically—with a

larger population, bigger economy, greater energy resources, and broader international ties. But neither matters much to the United States.

The multiplicity of interests abroad and divergence in backing at home argue for maintaining civil formal relations with both nations, while encouraging commercial relationships as well as other private contacts. There is no reason to make either one a formal ally. Washington has no meaningful program for the Caucasus.

Mead hopes “the Biden administration can build on this success to make the Caucasus more peaceful and less vulnerable to Russia.” However, look at the map. Armenia is closer to Russia. Armenia matters more to Russia. And Armenia can expect military support from Russia. Absent a foolish, no, looney decision to intervene militarily, what could Washington offer Yerevan to displace Moscow?

And what would the U.S. conceivably gain from such a role? It is a bit like suggesting that Russia send troops to help bring peace to Central America. The great power nearby would be understandably suspicious of and hostile to an act not likely to yield any tangible benefits for Moscow. Remember Ronald Reagan and his response to Soviet-backed Nicaragua.

Washington is more likely to gain long-term success if it eschews direct competition with Russia and uses its outside status to encourage dialogue and diplomacy within the region. America will be better off if the relationships are friendly, but won’t suffer much if they are not. One advantage of being a superpower is that not much that goes on in the world is particularly important. Interesting, tragic, annoying, irritating, unpleasant, bothersome, insulting, unfortunate, and much more. But not important, let alone vital.

Such also is the case of Afghanistan. The U.S. first got involved there to bleed the Red Army, not because the country had much intrinsic importance. Unfortunately, Washington channeled assistance through the Islamist Zia government in Pakistan. The latter bolstered radical forces, including Al Qaeda, which eventually brought America back in.

Washington did what it had to two decades ago and now can leave. Central Asia is about as far from the U.S. as possible. The world is full of other ungoverned and badly governed spaces, which cannot all be occupied by America. Better that surrounding powers, most notably China, Russia, India, Iran, and Pakistan, act on their interests in Afghanistan, which are far stronger than those of the U.S. Let them enjoy playing hegemon for a day. Washington should attempt to maintain positive relations with Afghanistan and its neighbors, but has no reason to remain militarily involved.

American policymakers tend to respond to events by asking what the U.S. should do. Instead, the right question is *should* America do anything? Since few of America’s overseas interests are important let alone vital, the right answer most often is no, at least not much of anything beyond diplomacy. Like in the Caucasus. That region undoubtedly is vital to someone, just not to the United States.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.