

Defense One

Don't Just End the War in Afghanistan, Repeal the Resolution That Authorized It

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Since President Joe Biden announced his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, saying “it’s time to end the forever war,” militants have bombed an Afghan school amid an uptick in violence, and the government in Kabul began readying for a fight. As Biden said, “War in Afghanistan was never meant to be a multigenerational undertaking,” and the decision to withdraw U.S. forces by September 11 is welcome news. But the “forever war” isn’t limited to boots on the ground in Afghanistan: Nearly two decades after 9/11, the U.S. is engaged in combat operations in some 14 countries, bombing half a dozen of them on a semi-regular basis. Ending one deployment won’t bring an end to endless war.

Undergirding this vast military overstretch is the congressional resolution passed three days after the 9/11 attacks. Three presidents in a row have stretched the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force into an enabling act for far-flung, seemingly endless war. But as its language and legislative history make clear, the 2001 AUMF had a narrower purpose: empowering the president to target the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks and anyone who aided them. And, as Biden noted, “We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead, and al Qaeda is degraded in Iraq, in Afghanistan.”

If so, isn’t it past time to repeal the legal authorization for the mission?

Unfortunately, President Biden and most of Congress aren’t interested in simply repealing the 2001 AUMF. They want to repeal and replace it with a new authorization broad enough to underwrite ongoing operations across the broader Middle East, from Libya to Pakistan. The danger of a replacement AUMF is that it will amount to hitting reset on a 20-year conflict, serving as congressional blessing for another multigenerational war.

Moreover, any authority Congress grants will likely be stretched still further by future presidents. Biden himself should be attuned to that danger. As a Senator, just after voting for the 2001 AUMF, he insisted the resolution was nothing like the Vietnam War’s Gulf of Tonkin

Resolution: “We do not say pell-mell, ‘Go do anything, any time, any place.’” The 2001 AUMF has now been in effect over three times as long as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and it’s morphed into the boundless grant of power then-Senator Biden disclaimed.

Yet the Biden team has done little to reassure anyone worried about the dangers of counterterror mission creep. The Pentagon is reportedly planning to reposition departing forces into neighboring Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to facilitate future drone strikes, bombing raids, and spy missions inside Afghanistan. And this week, an unnamed senior administration official affirmed that the administration will continue to target “the main threats to the American homeland” emanating “from Africa, from parts of the Middle East—Syria and Yemen.”

Americans should be skeptical of the claim that these alleged threats demand open-ended authority for waging war against disparate militant groups in multiple countries. The 9/11 attacks were an outlier event, not the arrival of a new normal. Since September 2001, an average of six people in America per year are killed by Islamic-inspired terrorism. Self-radicalized “lone-wolves” are a bigger risk factor than jihadists with operational connections to any of the myriad militant groups American forces are fighting overseas.

In fact, much of America’s post-9/11 military activism has exacerbated, rather than mitigated, the terrorism problem abroad. The data show a large spike in terrorism in the countries the United States either bombed or invaded, as militants took advantage of the disorder, opportunistic jihadists flooded in from elsewhere, and new grievances bred new enemies.

That “any time, any place” approach does little to guard against imminent threats to the U.S. home front. It’s a bloody, costly exercise in whack-a-mole against small bands of roving militants in complicated and dangerous environments half a world away. As the political scientist Paul Poast recently wrote, “It is explicitly a policy of maintenance, meaning it is designed to never end.”

The sprawling, low-intensity warfare such a policy demands entangles us deeper into local problems extraneous to American security. In Afghanistan, authority to target the culprits of 9/11 quickly morphed into a mission to reshape the politics and culture of a country we didn’t understand. As President Biden noted, “Our reasons for remaining in Afghanistan are becoming increasingly unclear.”

But if that’s so, what about our shifting rationales for involvement in Syria? Since 2014, the 2001 law has served as legal cover for military operations in Syria that Congress never envisioned, with increasingly perplexing official rationales including: fighting ISIS; fighting al-Qaeda off-shoots like al-Nusra and the Khorasan group; aiding Syrian rebels; protecting Israel; protecting oil; deterring Iran; and deterring Russia. The latest excuse is reportedly to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State and to block the Assad regime from reclaiming Syrian oil fields.

Worse still, deployments initially justified under the 2001 AUMF tend to generate their own rationale for conflict when U.S. forces draw fire. President Biden justified his February bombing of Syria as an exercise in constitutional self-defense, invoking his powers as “commander in chief and chief executive.” So long as we’re forward deployed in dangerous neighborhoods, that justification will be available, as will the risk of stumbling into a wider war. Under the logic of

the global war on terror, policymakers have lost sight of the distinction between distant regional violence and a direct threat to the United States.

The end of the war in Afghanistan presents Congress with an historic opportunity to break that cycle. No current threat remotely justifies roving presidential authority to wage war on multiple continents. To end the Forever War, end the Forever Authorization.

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