Overcoming Strategic Myths in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Earlier today, the Cato Institute released a new paper by Joshua Rovner, assistant professor of strategy and policy at the Naval War College, and Austin Long, assistant professor in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, addressing the twin problems of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

I've read many papers and articles on Afghanistan and Pakistan over the years, but this one is different, and deserving of special consideration. The authors narrow in on two crucial myths: 1) that U.S. counterterrorism efforts require the United States to engage in nation building in Afghanistan; and 2) that stabilizing Afghanistan will help to secure Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

From the Executive Summary:

Coalition strategy is based on the assumptions that the only way to deny al Qaeda safe haven is by building a strong central Afghan state and that Pakistan's nuclear complex will become increasingly vulnerable to militant attacks if the Taliban succeeds in Afghanistan.

Both assumptions are wrong. The United States does not need to build a state in Afghanistan because the conditions that allowed al Qaeda safe haven in the 1990s have permanently changed. Moreover, the steps needed to help Pakistan secure its nuclear arsenal have nothing to do with the war in Afghanistan. Policymakers should scale back their ambitions in Afghanistan. If they do so, they could... defend[] core U.S. interests and dramatically reduc[e] the costs to America in both blood and treasure.

Rovner will write more about Afghanistan and Pakistan here at The Skeptics later this week, but I wanted to alert everyone to this important study in the meantime.

Also, Professor Rovner will discuss his paper at the Cato Institute on Wednesday, June 29th. Other speakers include Joshua Foust of the American Security Project, the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon, and Cato's own Malou Innocent. Cato Associate Director of Foreign Policy Studies Justin Logan will moderate. The event begins at 4:00 pm and is open to the public. Space is limited, so please register here if you would like to attend.