We Didn't Abandon Afghanistan Then, But We Should Now

The Skeptics

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Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Charlie Rose this week that we shouldn't "walk away" from Afghanistan as we did in 1989. The lesson of that experience, he said, is that if we leave, "we'll be back in 10 or 20 years." Mullen was repeating an argument made by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and our next Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker. The argument is that if we abandon Afghanistan, terrorists will return in force, and therefore so will we.

There are several reasons why this is a terrible justification for continuing the war in its current form.

First, you cannot abandon what you never had. We funded the Mujahedeen in Afghanstan in the 1980s but did not fight in their war. What decreased later was our funding. And we did not cut off aid to the Mujahedeen in 1989 when the Soviets left, but rather several years later when the Najibullah government fell. After that, as civil war raged, there was no obvious side to take.

Second, this logic implies that we can never leave Afghanistan or never even draw down to a smaller force. But, as Josh Rovner and Austin Long point out in their new Cato Institute paper on the subject, things have changed in Afghanistan since the 1990s. Unlike then, we now have political will to attack terrorists with raids and the technology to do so with armed drones.

Third, contrary to conventional wisdom, we did have counterterrorism policy toward Afghanistan prior to 2001. Once bin Laden arrived, we regularly warned the Taliban not to harbor al Qaeda. We were increasing aid and support to the Northern Alliance prior to September 11. And of course the Clinton administration repeatedly tried to kill bin Laden. Counterterrorism policy toward Afghanistan may have been a failure at that time, but it did exist. I attempted to puncture the myth that we did nothing about al Qaeda in the 1990s in my chapter in this book.

It is neither necessary to our security nor possible at reasonable costs to build a stable state in Afghanistan. Official claims that we cannot again abandon it are smokescreens meant to confuse the issue.

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