

Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. -3: Can Non-intervention Survive Afghanistan?

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Executive Summary

A Winter's Tale

There's a nice scene in the film *The Godfather* during which one of the headstrong sons wants to confront a rival with some proposition and the old don cautions him, "Mention it; don't insist." That would also be good advice for America in the aftermath of the swift and brutal Russian invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. An eerie euphoria is sweeping this country, like the one that inflamed Europe in August 1914. Don Vito's counsel doesn't betoken cowardice -- just healthy realism and an interest in staying alive.

The one thing that almost anyone (doves as well as hawks, liberals and conservatives alike) would say about Afghanistan is that we can't just sit on our hands. I wonder: Why not? That sounds precisely like what we ought to be doing. Curiously, however, the one position that has hardly been expounded in the current American "great debate" is nonintervention, that is, the case for doing nothing. Not symbolic measures, not oblique retaliations, not vague threats, not verbal doctrines, not basing and deployment schemes, but flat nothing.

These are times that try the souls of noninterventionists. Opinion is divided: the triumphant hawks; the chastened doves, only recently converted to fear and bellicose reaction; the other doves, the left-liberal remnant, embarrassed by the erosion of the factual basis of their position and straining to find another benign formula for avoiding a final slide into intervention. Worse perhaps than the vindictive hawks are the repentant doves, who feel personally outraged by the Russians for mocking their earlier notions of how the world works. "Betrayed, yes, that's the word," complains Senator Ed Muskie; Russia "just ran out on us." George Ball, the old reliable devil's advocate of "hopeful" diplomatic solutions, now wants bigger defense budgets, more airlift, sealift, Marines, and bases throughout the Middle East, revival of the draft, and urgent coercion of Israel into a settlement favoring pan-Islamic goals. Clark Clifford, who wisely encouraged Lyndon Johnson to abandon Vietnam, is peddling American arms and threats around South Asia.

Carter vs. Carter

Jimmy Carter is also a converted dove. His State of the Union message in January 1980 should have been billed Carter vs. Carter because the president testified against the foreign policy of the first three years of his own administration. That policy had been noninterventionists, not through principle or design but by indirection and default. At Notre Dame in May 1977 the administration was going to select new priorities -- North-South instead of East-West, cosmic optimism instead of Spenglerian gloom, rampant moralism instead of cynical Realpolitik.

The result has been a sort of catatonic inaction. The clinical definition of catatonia is "a syndrome seen most frequently in schizophrenia, with muscular rigidity and mental stupor, sometimes alternating with great excitement and confusion." Some would say that sounds like an apt characterization of the foreign policy of the Carter administration. But if we can't have deliberate and consistent nonintervention, we must be grateful for incompetence, paralysis, and the Babel of many tongues.

The Sources of American Conduct

Afghanistan has not invalidated the case for nonintervention. The egregious Soviet conduct has simply stripped the veils from arguments that have passed for noninterventionist but were really evasions of choice or, worse, covert prescriptions for selective intervention.

Despite all of the time and effort that have been spent trying to determine the motives for Russia's invasion of Afghanistan, I would be impertinent enough to suggest that discerning the sources of this season's Soviet conduct doesn't prove a thing. What matters, rather, is our own propensity to intervene, regardless of whether our intervention is holy or profane, whether we are welcomed or not, whether our aid is begged or disdained. What matters also is our own calculus of intervention -- whether or not it is feasible within the constraints that beset our system and pervade the international system. In these respects the judgment of our recent experience remains that intervention is likely to be expensive, risky, and fruitless -- not in all cases, to be sure, but often enough so that the whole enterprise should not be undertaken.

The hawks have greeted the defections of the summer noninterventionists as proof that the nation is belatedly emerging from its comatose reaction to Vietnam -- that "trauma," that "failure of nerve." But they miss the point. The real lessons of Vietnam are not the data of misplaced pop psychology; they are what Vietnam proved about our system: the capabilities; the constraints (which are, in the last analysis, social and constitutional); its ability to respond, to persevere, to deliver sustained support to political authorities during obscure, intractable, precarious conflicts; how much grace we will give our leaders to make good on their promises before we politically emasculate them. These are objective matters and cannot be casually or willfully set aside; and they tell whether an American president can credibly wield the threat of military intervention .

Some critics -- generally within the left-liberal segment of the spectrum of opinion on Afghanistan -- reflecting on America's strategic predicament and their own logical predicament, have been led to benign and right-minded but essentially wishful calls for a new deal with the Russians, new rules of the game.

Sure, deals. . . . But what would they consist of ? Any imaginable starting point would have to be post-Afghanistan, and the end would be a crass Russian-American condominium. They would be Nixon-Kissinger kinds of deals: we let you run your part of the world; you let us run ours. And we would still need the threat of American arms to make them stick.

Actually, there's nothing particularly new about deals. Nixon and Kissinger thought they had a deal with the Russians in Moscow 1972 and San Clemente 1973; it didn't last much beyond the Mideast war of October 1973. And the obsession with impressing on our adversaries certain codes of conduct has, from the start, characterized the approach of Zbigniew Brzezinski.

The kind of deal envisaged by Brzezinski inevitably incorporates linkage -- the contrived relation of various functional categories of the adversary's behavior and the American response: the balance of strategic nuclear forces, political and military ambitions in other regions of the world, trade and investment and technology, the practice of human rights. Several administrations have been looking for ways to multiply linkages in order to reestablish American control over the conduct of other nations. Nixon and Kissinger had attempted to entangle the Soviets in a web of useful commercial contacts that would not easily be broken for the sake of strategic opportunism. Carter and Brzezinski, however, turned linkage from a carrot into a stick.

I say the less linkage the better. In a world faced with risks of nuclear destruction, where geopolitics is becoming a prohibitively expensive game, we should be looking for ways to unlink: to minimize provocations; to let regional conflicts burn themselves out; to suppress commitments engendered by alliances (which are not barriers to war but

transmission belts for war); to uncouple one stage of escalation from another, cutting the chain from conventional war to a strategic nuclear exchange; to compartmentalize the world's troubles, for there will be many. We should unlink international functions, such as trade, communications, cultural affairs, and, yes, even sports, from matters of "high strategy. " Indeed, we should keep "the national interest" out of the affairs of citizens and their private organizations. On both sides of the cold war, cliques that call themselves governments presume that they can appropriate and manipulate the activities of those who happen to live within their borders.

The trick is to learn to live in a world without deals, without rules -- an asymmetrical world, an unfair world, if you will. Bleak as it may sound, we should observe a code of conduct that is constructive for ourselves, even if it is not reciprocated. The key to a policy of nonintervention that is consistent enough to withstand a few tests by the Soviets and others in the months and years to come is acceptance of the costs of nonintervention.

Pay Now, Apocalypse Later

It's strange that the self-described hardliners rarely resort to hard data about the costs -- and thus the attractiveness and feasibility -- of the strategic moves they urge upon the American people. Never any numbers; with them it is all nouns, adjectives, and verbs -- psychological metaphors, epic poetry, such as Norman Podhoretz's "undifferentiated fear, loathing, and revulsion, " "native anti-Americanism, " "self-hatred," "the culture of appeasement," and the like.

But the real argument has always been about the requisites for peace in a nuclear age -- more precisely, about how we can gain for ourselves an interval of peace in an age of worldwide political, social, and economic chaos, and also in an age of nuclear parity and nuclear "plenty" (to use Kissinger's perversely appealing term). The obsession with "culture" misses all the critical features of the situation, not just the strategic ones but the truly moral ones as well. What is relevant is not culture but structure.

Who will still argue, after Afghanistan, for a smaller military force and a reduced defense budget? Yet the case for military reductions is no worse than it was five years ago, when it was a lot more respectable and the defense budget was a lot lower; it isn't the Russians that have changed. And the case for arms expansion is not better now, suddenly, than it ever was. There are still only two things weapons can do: Rust or explode, and we must pray that they rust. The defense budget request of the Carter administration for fiscal 1981 is \$159 billion. At least partially because of Afghanistan and related challenges, the only debate in sight with regard to increasing future defense budgets is between the five-percenters and the eight- or ten-percenters. Just an average of these percentages, on top of a plausible expectation of inflation, gives us 20 percent annual increases -- a defense budget of \$329 billion by 1985, and over \$800 billion a year by the end of the decade. We already spend from \$25 to \$30 billion a year to support our interest in the Middle East.

Some important intangibles are attached to the preparation for war: private and public welfare forgone, constitutional processes distorted, citizens and their assets mobilized, bodies and minds regimented. Those costs are borne year in and year out, whether this or that intervention is a quagmire or a piece of cake.

"Peace For Our Time"

This fact should bring us to a sense of our real choices at this poignant moment. It is easy to note, and regret, America's defeats and defaults of the past decade. It is harder to see that, in the aftermath of "Afghanistan" (the emblem for the half-dozen or dozen challenges and probes that America has fielded and fumbled), the comfortable middle options have dropped away. We are left with the classic dilemma of the mature imperial power. The only alternative now to the official strategy of resuscitated military interventionism -- as the administration lapses into Cold War II (or discovers that the cold war really never ended) -- is an "isolationist" foreign policy.

There is no doubt that the noninterventionist cause suffers from a lack of appealing labels. And let's be honest: Nonintervention does borrow from such antecedents as "isolationism" (if this is understood as disengagement), "Fortress America" (what else?), "America First" (now that was a coalition -- from Norman Thomas to Charles Lindbergh), even Neville Chamberlain's "peace for our time." (How much worse is that than Richard Nixon's "generation of peace?" And Afghanistan, too, is "a far-off country about which we know nothing.")

If we have to find more positive images for nonintervention, maybe we should call it a kind of realism, even national maturity, in an evolving strategic universe. Call it learning to live in the world as it is, not as our leaders fantasize it. Call it minding our own business better, and becoming clearer about what that business is and isn't .

And if we need rhetorical support, let it be from our proud and sensible native tradition. It was John Quincy Adams, as secretary of state (an ardent continental expansionist, incidentally, one of the architects of the present American territorial state) who said, on the Fourth of July 1821, speaking against intervention to help the Greeks throw off Turkish rule:

America . . . goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.

As President Carter looks out over the world he sees "turmoil, strife and change." There's nothing wrong with his eyesight, but there is something wrong with his vision. For he assumed (and this is the heart of interventionism) that "the state of our union depends on the state of the world." Of course, that proposition is a truism. But with the world increasingly out of our control, it is time we made it less true.