

Buying our Way Out of Afghanistan?

Written by Neil Snyder

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NEIL SNYDER, JUL 31 2017

Dr. Barry Stentiford recently closed a blog on this site with words of caution, “expecting or seeking a clean, definitive end is ahistorical and not productive.” With these sage words still hanging in the air, I read of a movement to offload our strategic burden in Afghanistan to private military contractors. The idea that the United States could quickly, cleanly, and simply privatize a war, like selling off an underperforming investment, raises consternation when juxtaposed against the conditions underneath the other conflicts covered in this blog (Russia, North Korea, Syria). Given that the U.S. is currently undergoing a strategic review of the war in Afghanistan with real and potentially immediate implications for deployed forces, I offer no unsolicited commentary on the nation’s Afghan strategy out of respect for the national leaders and our decision-making process. However, specific consideration of a one-off privatized solution to the Afghan War does warrant general reflection.

There are certainly valid concerns for privatization: is wholesale privatization of a theater possible, will this policy lead to future privatization, does privatization circumvent normal democratic constraints on the use of force? If we temporarily set aside specific ethical or operative criticism of a privatized solution to any foreign policy problem, a privatized solution could be recast as a matter of strategic freedom of choice: simply another instrument of power available for employment in support of national interest.

In one sense, the U.S.’ ability to choose an instrument of power and to wield power within the borders of another sovereign state says much about *future* U.S. leadership in the international system. Military intervention, conducted by uniformed service members or perhaps continued by contracted forces, is an act of policy and shapes how power is wielded in the future and conditions adversaries’ expectations of our future strategies. Consider that military interventions, absent broad international support such as a UN mandate or under clear conditions of pre-emption, which violated sovereignty of other states have been viewed with deep skepticism, thought to affect legitimacy of the intervening state. Consider our reaction to Russian employment of irregular forces or “hybrid war” tactics in the Ukraine, retrospective criticism of the U.S. preventative war/intervention against Saddam Hussein in 2003, or Russia’s response to the U.S. intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s. In each case, actions create precedent for the accepted or legitimate use of force and actions communicate to other states the role of sovereignty in the system.

Richard Haas, in his latest book *The World in Disarray*, makes a strong argument that the norms and rules of the international system are failing and that a new operating system (“World Order 2.0”) is needed to deal with the current and future threats to global stability. Many have repeated and questioned our application of the Pottery Barn Rule (you break it, you buy it; credited in application to General Colin Powell, former Secretary of State), but continued U.S. engagement to manage problems like those in Afghanistan and Iraq signal our recognition of an obligation to the stability of the system. A continued strategic effort to manage the problems where we face conflict, to borrow Haas’ recent words, is inherently a sovereign obligation – particularly where we had a role in the founding conditions of the war and a continued interest in counterterrorism.

Now returning to the matter of our privatized military option in Afghanistan, we consider the nature of the signal that outsourcing sends to adversaries. A privatization of the war in Afghanistan could risk signaling that the U.S. is no longer obliged to remain nationally engaged, and is willing to choose when and when not to meet obligations. The argument could follow that the U.S. was willing to violate sovereignty to enter Iraq in 2003, and we’re now willing to violate sovereignty to exit Afghanistan in 2017 (by virtue of divesting our national effort and paying for a contracted or non-state solution). Reality or hyperbole, our actions (or inaction) can be used as a pretext for our adversaries’ acts of intervention, such as the hypothetical presence of Russian-backed, privatized forces in the

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Ukraine, Syria, or other areas of strategic concern to the United States.

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