

Afghanistan Land Mine

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Frederick Starr's Dec. 19 op-ed article, "Afghanistan Land Mine," seriously misrepresented U.S. policy toward Afghanistan.

Mr. Starr appears to believe that the United States has "bought" what he terms a misguided Russian policy that overemphasizes the problem of Taliban support for terrorism, that we have done so at the expense of the interests of Central Asian states, that it was a mistake to sponsor this week's U.N. Security Council resolution strengthening sanctions against the Taliban, that we have discussed "overthrowing" the Taliban with the Indian government and that we have even given the Russians "special equipment" to be used against the Chechens.

He is wrong on every count. The United States has taken the lead in calling attention to Taliban support for terrorist organizations such as that of Osama bin Laden because he and his followers have targeted American citizens and train in Afghan camps--not because the Russians have told us to do so. It is hard to see that a different policy would serve U.S. interests.

We are pleased to have worked closely with Russia in the Security Council to address those concerns. Central Asian governments are also directly threatened by such groups, and that is why they, too, supported the new U.N. arms embargo against the Taliban. Our discussions with India, as with other governments, have not, as Mr. Starr alleged, been about overthrowing the Taliban. Rather, they have focused on those Taliban policies that threaten our interests and theirs and the need to find a peaceful political settlement in Afghanistan by establishing a broad-based representative government. We have consistently stated, and strongly believe, there can be no military solution in Afghanistan. As for Mr. Starr's unusual speculation about U.S.-supplied "special equipment" used in Chechnya, it is simply without any foundation whatsoever.

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I was appalled at S. Frederick Starr's assertion that the United States is joining "an Indian-Russian crusade against Muslim Afghanistan." The United States has a clear duty to take action against the Taliban, which harbors terrorist Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network. Al Qaeda has repeatedly struck U.S. targets, from the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing (19 U.S. citizens killed) to the 1998 embassy bombings in East Africa (301 killed, including 12 U.S. citizens) to the attack on the USS Cole (17 U.S. servicemen killed).

Moreover, the Taliban drives instability throughout the region. Last year, Taliban-sponsored insurgents nearly sparked a war between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan. The Taliban-supported Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan launched invasions of Central Asia in each of the past two years. These attacks on the United States and regional stability are reason enough to act in Afghanistan, regardless of Indian and Russian interests.

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Frederick Starr is right about U.S. policy toward Afghanistan. However, he might have suggested some ways in which the Bush administration could defuse the land mine left by the Clinton team. Why has U.S. policy ignored the views of the Central Asian countries in favor of that of Russia regarding the Taliban "menace"?

One reason is that the State Department's policy team for all of the former Soviet Union countries is dominated by Russophiles. Few if any people in the office of the special adviser to the newly independent states, or the deputy secretary's office, have Central Asian experience.

Mr. Starr also did not address another critical reason for our inability to deal with Afghanistan realistically: We have allowed the Taliban's treatment of women to dominate our view of the regime. Clearly the Taliban's gender policies should weigh heavily in how we cooperate with or assist it, but those policies should not determine whether we recognize the entity that controls 95 percent of Afghanistan. Certainly the Taliban would not be the only unsavory government that we recognize at least nominally.

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