Forcing Congress to do its job to curb unnecessary wars

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COMMENTARY

By Editorial Board
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OPINION:

Three U.S. soldiers were killed and dozens more wounded in a drone attack in Jordan over the weekend. President Biden blames Iran, and powerful politicians, including Sen. Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, are insisting on lethal retaliation.

One thing is certain: Neither Mr. McConnell nor Mr. Biden will seek the constitutionally required declaration of war before the bombs drop. No such declaration has been made since World War II some 80 years ago. Formal

declarations of war have been replaced by vague, after-the-fact congressional resolutions that merely underscore the legislative branch's abdication of its responsibility.

Congress doesn't like taking difficult votes, and thanks to its lack of oversight, overseas military entanglements have spiraled out of control. More than 55,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Japan; 30,000 are operating in the Middle East — many in harm's way — and 100,000 are in Europe, including many that may be drawn into the war between Russia and Ukraine.

The United States is involved in centuries-old blood feuds across the globe, including some that have faded from the headlines. For 25 years, American troops have been stationed in Kosovo, a hotbed of ethnic tension that declared its independence from Serbia and is recognized as a legitimate country by only half of U.N. member states. There is no sign our forces there will return in the near future.

Undeclared wars in Afghanistan and Iraq proved the U.S. military can swiftly defeat its enemies, but these actions also raised the vital question of whether Afghanistan, Iraq and the United States are any better off after the deaths of 7,000 U.S. personnel and $1.6 trillion spent. The Defense Department estimates the cost of these wars at $8,278 for each U.S. taxpayer.

State lawmakers have found a clever way to coerce Congress into weighing these costs. Earlier this month, the New Hampshire House of Representatives voted 187-182 to adopt "Defend the Guard" legislation that would recognize the governor's power to refuse to deploy the state's National Guard troops in overseas combat without a formal declaration of war.

A similar bill is set for introduction in the Arizona State Legislature. It is championed by state Sen. Wendy Rogers, a Republican and former Air Force pilot who wants political accountability before Arizona Guardsmen are called up to spill their blood on foreign soil.

Today, 22,000 Guard members find themselves overseas, and in times of armed conflict, they make up as much as one-third of deployed personnel. As commander in chief of their respective Guard troops, the governors of the 50 states ought to exercise their authority to strong-arm Congress into respecting the Constitution.

If there were a national vote before these troops find themselves in the line of fire, members of Congress could be held accountable for that decision — and for its aftermath. They may even be inclined to insist troops come home when the mission is complete.

The U.S. has a direct interest in many of the combat operations. For example, keeping Red Sea shipping lanes free from Iran's proxy attacks mirrors Thomas Jefferson's battle against radical Islamic piracy on the Barbary Coast.

War declarations in these instances shouldn't be a problem. The only reason for Congress to duck responsibility is to engage in wars that are not in the public interest.

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