The Wages of a Strategy of Avoidance

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Resumé

USA har inte lyxen att hålla sig borta från världen som på George Washingtons tid. För att fortsätta samhällsbyggandet hemma måste landet behålla sin särställning utomlands. Det kan det bara göra om det har medlen, förmågan och viljan att försvara sina intressen och dess allierades och vänners, med våld om nödvändigt. I artikeln diskuteras följderna av neddragning av försvarsanslagen och ges en rad exempel på att president Obamas vilja att undvika internationella åtaganden har haft olyckliga följder: Libyen, Irak och Syrien. Administrationens misstag har varit att överreagera på George W Bushs politik. Ju mer USA avstår från väl övertänkta men nödvändiga steg för att värna sina intressen, desto mer inbjuder det till hot mot dessa intressen som drar in det i omständigheter som det har arbetat för att undvika.

IT IS BY now clear to all those who follow international security issues that the President of the United States is absolutely determined to avoid enmeshing the United States in another international conflict. When he first ran for President, Mr. Obama made clear that if elected he would end America's military operations in Iraq. He did not condition that promise on any particular set of conditions on the ground. He simply was going to get America out. And he did.

The president had indicated that it was his plan that some number of American forces would remain in Iraq to help stabilize that fractious state. But that plan presupposed an agreement regarding the future status of American forces in Iraq. No such agreement was ever reached; and there is little evidence that Mr. Obama personally worked hard to achieve it.

Less than a year into his presidency, before he had withdrawn all American combat troops from Iraq, he made essentially the same commitment regarding Afghanistan. He did so even as he simultaneously announced a "surge" of American forces into that country. Not surprisingly, Afghanistan's president Karzai, the Taliban and the Haqqani forces, the Pakistanis, and even America's allies, all focused primarily on the withdrawal rather than the surge. Karzai reacted by distancing himself ever further from Washington, recognizing that in the long run his country could not depend on American support. The Taliban, the Haqqanis, and the Pakistanis, all bided their time, waiting for the departure of American forces. And America's allies and partners in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) began their own withdrawals, anticipating that of the United States.

None of these developments seemed to faze Mr. Obama. As his Secretary of Defense, Bob Gates, subsequently asserted "the president ... doesn't believe in his own strategy and doesn't consider the war to be his." It was a damning assessment, all the more so because Gates had a reputation for keeping his own counsel, and not only while in government service.

Obama's determination to be a president who ended wars, in contrast to his

predecessor who started them, colored his reaction to the fall of Ghaddafi. Overruling his own advisors, including then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Obama chose to minimize, as much as possible, America's public role in overthrowing Ghaddafi. Instead, he chose to "lead from behind," with the British, French, Arabs and even the Swedes having a more prominent role in carrying out operations against the dictator's forces. In fact, American air strikes against Ghadaffi's air defenses, and its intelligence, command-and-control and logistical support, were vital to the success of the operation. But to the White House, the image of an America that was not leading the operation "from the front" was no less important.

Washington's lukewarm support for the Syrian opposition to Bashar al-Assad was yet a further step backward from military intervention and operations overseas. The White House reacted with umbrage after Assad began to use poison gas against his own people, threatening to intervene in the civil war. Yet tens of thousands of Syrians had already been decimated by Assad's forces while Washington stood by, wringing its hands and lecturing the Syrian dictator. The president called the use of chemical weapons a "red line" that could not be tolerated. His threat of military action came to nothing, however, as the Administration backed away from seeking Congressional approval for military strikes against Assad's forces.

America's slide toward disengagement has continued in the face of near-simultaneous crises in eastern Europe and Iraq, even as the Syrian civil war continues to rage on. The president and Secretary of State John Kerry spoke out in the strongest possible terms against the Russian absorption of the Crimea and its fomenting of civil strife in eastern Ukraine, and then against the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and al Shams (ISIS) as they rapidly conquered western Iraq and marched on Baghdad. In both cases, as with Syria, the United States made it clear that it preferred "diplomatic solutions" to the crises, "diplomatic" being a code word for extreme American reluctance to employ military forces of any kind. That has thus far proved to have been the case with respect to Ukraine, and is likely to remain so.

As for Iraq and Syria, the Obama Administration has found itself forced to employ military assets despite President Obama's repeated insistence that there would be no American "boots on the ground." In addition to launching air strikes against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, the Administration deployed some 1,000 "advisors" as the situation in Baghdad and northern Iraq became increasingly precarious. It may find that it has to send more such "boots," especially if those advisors come under fire.

Nevertheless, after having served six years in office, it is clear that President Obama's national security policy is one of avoidance, or if avoidance proves impossible, minimal military commitment. That policy was adumbrated in the president's early focus on the need for "nation building at home," and implicitly has drawn its inspiration from George Washington's September 1796 farewell address to the American people, in which America's first president stated that:

So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop… Let me not be understood as capable of patronizing infidelity to existing engagements. I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy. I repeat it, therefore,

let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them… Taking care always to keep ourselves by suitable establishments on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.[1]

Interpreting the QDR and the Fiscal Year 2015 defense budget

The Quadrennial Defense Review

The president's approach to national security is best understood in light of the most recent Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), a statement of Administration policy, strategy and force objectives, and the fiscal year 2015 defense budget, both presented to the U.S. Congress in March 2014. The 2014 QDR represented the fifth statement of US strategy in five years. It followed upon the 2010 QDR; Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2011 announcement of a redirection of American military assets and diplomatic emphasis from Europe to Asia, now commonly known as the "pivot to Asia;" President Obama's "Defense Strategic Guidance," released in January 2012 in response to the Fiscal Year 2011 Budget Control Act (more about which below); and Secretary of Defense Chick Hagel's Strategic Choices and Management Review, completed in 2013.

It is arguable that the profusion of strategy documents, each differing to a greater or lesser degree from its predecessor, was an indication that the Administration really had no strategy. Instead, what passed for a national security strategy actually was more a reflection of the Administration's budgetary priorities even before the Budget Control Act came into force. In this regard, the QDR is no different from the four strategy statements that preceded it. Indeed, the 2014 QDR reads more like a budget document than a forward looking strategic plan. It shares verbatim language—phrases, sentences, and the occasional paragraph, with the Administration's defense budget presentation.

The QDR is a flawed strategic document in three other respects. First of all, it is a backward-looking document. It essentially projects forward into the future the international security situation that obtained at the end of 2014, without accounting for the vagaries of international developments and the uncertainty that always surrounds the nature of any future military contingency. There is little mention of Russia, other than as a possible partner "in seeking solutions to regional challenges, when our interests align, including Syria, Iran, and post-2014 Afghanistan,"[2] some passing mention of the "risks" entailed by its military buildup, and none at all regarding its objectives in Ukraine and elsewhere. There is no discussion of the growing tensions between China and Japan in the East China Sea. Nor is there any anticipation of a collapse of the Iraqi state due to the authoritarian and sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. Instead, the QDR focuses heavily on defeating what it calls "terrorist" or "violent extremists"[3] (the appellation "Islamic extremists" is considered politically incorrect)—as inchoate a term as the terrorists themselves—against whom Special Operations Forces, unmanned aircraft, space-based and cyber assets, the assets that the Administration most favors, are exceedingly effective.

On the other hand, it de-emphasizes the role of conventional forces, to the degree that it no longer envisages a requirement

to fight and win two major conflicts simultaneously. With the exception of a brief period in the early years of the first Clinton Administration, the so-called two war strategy has been the backbone of American force posture since World War II. The 2014 QDR harks back to 1993–94, the era of what was called the "win-hold-win" strategy, when it asserts that "if deterrence fails at any given time, U.S. forces will be capable of defeating a regional adversary in a large-scale multi-phased campaign, and denying the objectives of – or imposing unacceptable costs on – a second aggressor in another region."[4] "Win-hold-win" presupposed that American forces would defeat an adversary in one major theater, while at the same time staving off an adversary in a second theater until the victorious forces could be transferred there and achieve a second victory. It provided the rationale for reducing force levels, since two simultaneous victories in two theaters was no longer contemplated.

"Win-hold-win" was quickly discredited, however, because it was impossible to know how quickly victory could be achieved in the initial theater. Nor could anyone predict what losses might be sustained in the course of that victory. The forces in the second theater therefore would have no certainly of when, and by how many units, they would be reinforced.

The 2014 QDR, with its strategy of winning in one theater while inflicting unacceptable costs on the enemy in a second theater, likewise is intended to justify lower force levels, especially land force levels. Yet it essentially begs the same questions that undermined the credibility of win-hold-win. It is not at all clear how forces in a second theater could impose unacceptable costs on an enemy, especially since the QDR gives no indication of who the enemy actually is. If, for example, American units were fighting in Korea, which the QDR identifies as a potential major conflict, the requirement for forces to inflict "unacceptable costs" on an adversary in a second theater would be considerably higher if that enemy were China, as opposed to Iran. Moreover, it is impossible to determine what an enemy might consider to be "unacceptable." After all, the North Vietnamese tolerated massive American bombing attacks, and the huge military and civilian losses that accompanied them, and continued to fight on until they drove American forces from Vietnam. Forces that glorify death in battle, such as, for example Islamic extremists, likewise will not find any attack, however intense, unacceptable until and unless they are defeated outright.

The QDR has a second major flaw: it presupposes cooperation with allies, presumably to offset the reduction in American force levels, without actually indicating how exactly it will bring about that cooperation. In fact, most of America's allies have cut back on their military spending. Moreover, the Administration's budget-driven decision to withdraw forces from Europe undermines the QDR's stated objective of increasing interoperability with and among its NATO partners. As a Professor at the U.S. Army War College has pointed out:

One of the most important tools for maintaining interoperability among allied militaries—the forward presence of U.S. troops in Europe—continues to shrink… Ultimately a reduced American military presence in Europe will make coalition operations with NATO allies both harder and riskier by increasing friction at the operational and tactical levels.[5]

Finally, the QDR assumes that a significant proportion of the funding for forces that underpin American defense pos-

ture will derive from efficiencies in managing the costs of personnel, weapons and infrastructure. Yet these efficiencies, many of which have been proposed in the past, presuppose Congressional approval, which until now has not been forthcoming. Why they should be adopted at this time by a Congress that is bitterly divided along partisan lines is a question that the QDR does not address.

The Fiscal Year 2015 Budget

Like its immediate predecessors in FY 2012–2013 and 2014, the Administration's FY 2015 budget request to the Congress was informed and constrained by the Budget Control Act of Fiscal Year 2011. This act had two separate impacts on Pentagon spending. First, it required that the Department of Defense reduce its spending by a total of $487 billion, spread over the ten years beginning in Fiscal Year 2012. Second, in the event that the Congress could not agree to cuts that would total at least $1.2 trillion beginning in the nine year period FY 2013–2021, the Act would trigger an automatic across-the-board reduction in discretionary spending that would result in addition cuts to the defense budget of approximately $500 billion for each of the nine years beginning in January (later postponed until March) 2013.

Since the Congress was unable to reach a budgetary agreement, the sequester came into effect, although DOD mitigated its impact in Fiscal Year 2013, when it received permission to draw upon unobligated funds from the previous two fiscal years. A subsequent budget agreement, known as the Ryan-Murray agreement after the chairmen of the two Congressional Budget Committees, Congressman Paul Ryan and Senator Patty Murray, reduced the sequester's impact in both Fiscal Year 2014 and 2015, though in the latter case, the budget relief amounted to about $7 billion, that is, less than two per cent. of the total budget request of $495.5 billion. Moreover, because the President exempted the personnel accounts from sequestration every year since it took effect, the burden of sustaining the cuts fell on the operations and acquisition accounts.

The budget request therefore postulated a reduction in the active Army from its wartime high of 570,000 to 440,000 troops, and a reduction of six brigade combat teams and two combat aviation brigades. The Army Reserve and National Guard also sustained force level cuts. The Navy sustained a reduction in force levels to 283 ships, as well as the possible retirement of an aircraft carrier in Fiscal Year 2016. The Air Force was slated to lose 183 aircraft, with twenty more lost to the Reserves; four active squadrons would be disbanded. Only the Marine Corps and the Special Operations Forces were protected from major reductions.

Since the onset of the Afghanistan War, the Department of Defense required supplemental appropriations, later redesignated as the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Account, to prosecute the wars in that country and in Iraq. In practice, DOD was able to draw upon these additional funds to support operations and acquisition programs that properly should have been funded in its regular (or "base") budget. With the end of war in Iraq, and the impending withdrawal of most forces from Afghanistan, the Administration submitted a budget of $58.6 billion for Afghanistan and lesser operations in 2015. Given the intensifying operations against ISIS, that figure will certainly increase by at least an additional $10 billion for the upcoming

year. Nevertheless, even with such an increase, it is unlikely that DOD could mitigate strains on its regular account by drawing from OCO funds.

In presenting its defense budget request, the Administration made three additional but extremely dubious assumptions that enabled it to increase funding for the DOD. First, it wished away the sequester beginning in 2016, although by then the Ryan-Murray agreement would no longer be in force. If the sequester were not modified or eliminated, the Pentagon would have a shortfall of $115 billion through Fiscal Year 2019. Second, the Administration promulgated what it called an "Opportunity, Growth and Security Initiative," that, among other things, would restore $26 billion to the Pentagon in FY 2015. Finally, as briefly noted above, the budget proposal included savings derived from cutbacks in pay increases and benefits for military personnel, improvements in the acquisition system, and a new round of base closures and consolidations. Reflecting its links to the civil service unions, the Administration proposed only minimal cuts to civilian personnel, despite the fact that civilian workforce levels had increased by some 80,000 persons since 2000.

Few believe that the sequester will disappear; accordingly, the DOD will have to sustain further budget cuts to meet sequester levels. Similarly, the Congress has reacted negatively to both the "Opportunity, Growth and Security Initiative," and the Administration's proposed savings from efficiencies, particularly with respect to personnel benefits and base closures. As a result, for the time being, and assuming no change in Administration defense policy and strategy, there will be little relief available to the operations and acquisition accounts over the next two years.

The Consequences of a Strategy of Avoidance and Minimalist Force Posture

There can be little doubt that both the Chinese government and Vladimir Putin have interpreted White House passivity and declining defense budgets as an opportunity to behave in a more openly aggressive fashion toward their immediate neighbors.

Beijing has ramped up its pressure on the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea, seizing reefs claimed by the former, and building an oil rig – and aggressively protecting it – in the latter's Exclusive Economic Zone. As for President Putin's actions, there is widespread international agreement that he seized Crimea because he could and that he is destabilizing Ukraine because he can, that is, because the West in general and the United States in particular, have not exerted enough pressure on him to change his behavior. Indeed, the Administration's claim to have isolated Russia is belied not only by the fact that several key countries, including surprising ones like Argentina and Israel, did not vote for a General Assembly Resolution to condemn the seizure of the Crimea, but also by China's agreement to purchase $400 billion worth of Russian gas over the next thirty years.

Washington's reluctance to supply the moderate opposition to Bashar Assad for more than two years, its inability to act upon the President's threat to employ military force against Assad's units if they employed chemical weapons, and Assad's continuing employment of barrel bombs filled with chemicals despite strongly worded warnings from Washington, have underscored the widespread impression that America is turning away from the Middle East. That

impression has been further reinforced by the success of ISIS in Iraq, which might have been far more limited if President Obama had personally pressured Nuri al-Maliki to sign a status of forces agreement that would have allowed thousands of American troops to remain in that country.

Moreover, the fact that the Administration was seriously considering cooperation with Iran to push back the ISIS forces served only to convince both Israel and key Sunni Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that Washington was prepared to sign an agreement with Tehran that would enable Iran to preserve the capability to break out its nuclear weapons program on very short notice. Indeed, suspicion of President Obama in Israel runs so high, that any form of American cooperation with Iran could prompt an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities which not only would cause further turmoil in the already unstable Middle East, but could drag Mr. Obama into the large scale ground war he has so desperately sought to forestall.

It is, in fact, the second and third order consequences of the Obama Administration's strategy of avoidance, such as an Israeli attack on Iran, that render that policy so dangerous. The worldwide perception of American withdrawal – some would say weakness – can only lead national actors to reconsider their relations with Washington, and sub-national actors to assume that they can more easily achieve their radical objectives. Some American friends, such as Japan, in addition to Israel, may conclude that they must rely even more on their own capabilities to deter powerful neighbors and take actions that could destabilize their regions. Other entities, like the Kurdish Regional Government, will conclude (if they have not already done so), that they can never rely on the United States as a source for sustained support. As a result, they may turn a deaf ear to American pleas that they remain part of Iraq; yet a declaration of Kurdish independence might further destabilize the northern Middle East.

States that America has courted, such as India, may conclude that a strengthening ties to a passive Washington is not worth the price of jettisoning long-held strategies of self-reliance and independence. States such as China and Russia, will, as noted, be less hesitant to bully, if not occupy, their neighbors. And outright adversaries such as North Korea, may be encouraged to take further aggressive steps against American allies and interests.

None of the foregoing observations comprise a recommendation for American activism that would involve intervention in civil strife anywhere in the world. There is indeed some merit in a more cautious, modest American foreign policy that focuses on the core interests of the United States and its allies. Even the launching of the 2003 Iraq War might be justified on the grounds that every major Western intelligence agency reached the same conclusion that Saddam was proceeding with a nuclear weapons program. Ironically it was the Israelis, in the person of then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who warned the Bush Administration that the real threat was coming from Iran, not Iraq.

Where the Bush Administration went wrong in Iraq was in its attempt to bring democracy to a country that had never known a democratic system; to remain in the country for years rather than months; to have disbanded the Iraqi Army, leaving disaffected Sunnis with guns and ammunition in their hands; and to have disbanded the Ba'ath party at all levels, leaving the state without a functioning bureaucracy. A by-product of these decisions was the pol-

icy, programmatic and especially budgetary neglect of Afghanistan, which enabled a dispersed and despondent Taliban to regroup in Pakistan and launch what in effect became the Second American Afghan War.

The mistake of the Obama Administration has been to over-react to Bush Administration policies. A more modest American policy would probably still have resulted in America's relatively minimal involvement in the Libyan civil war. Even then, the American decision to go beyond defending civilians by fostering regime change, albeit indirectly, resulted in several unforeseen and unwanted outcomes. To begin with, the ousting of Ghaddafi, who had agreed to dismantle his nuclear weapons program, reinforced the determination of both the North Koreans to maintain their program and the Iranian to continue with theirs. Second, regime change in Libya, which was soon followed by American support for regime change in Egypt, deeply worried America's conservative Arab allies. And finally, and perhaps worst of all, regime change has led not to stability, much less democracy, but instead to ongoing civil strife and the dissolution of the state that is now being mirrored in Iraq.

Obama rightly resisted inserting American military power into the Syrian civil war. But once again, he over-reacted to the perceived interventionism of his predecessor. A modest but realistic national security policy would, on the one hand, have provided for arming the moderate Syrian rebels when they first called for assistance nearly three years ago. On the other hand, it would neither have provided for drawing ineffectual red lines nor for hesitating to aid the opposition until it was too late. By the time Washington was ready to act upon its commitment to aid the moderate rebels and to employ air power in Syria, the opposition had effectively been taken over by radicals while, at the same time, Assad, with assistance from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, was slowly but surely reclaiming control of the country. Finally, and as noted at the outset of this essay, a more modest but realistic national security policy would nevertheless have militated for retaining a small but important presence in Iraq, and for avoiding any broadcasts of American withdrawal timetables from Afghanistan.

When George Washington issued his farewell address, the United States was a new, relatively weak country, protected by a vast ocean. It could afford to remain aloof from the world, other than to trade with it. As President Washington pointed out, "our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course."

America's situation today is neither detached nor distant. America is still the world's most powerful state, with its most powerful economy. America's dollar is the world's reserve currency. America still dominates the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the economic institutions that it created in the aftermath of World War II. America is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and is still that organization's biggest funder.

In the realm of international security, America is the leader of history's most formidable alliance, NATO, and is bound by the Rio Pact – a defense agreement with 21 Latin American nations, and bilateral treaties with Japan, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, Philippines and Australia though the ANZUS Treaty. The Congress has also committed the United States to support an additional group of what it has termed "major non-NATO allies," name-

ly Israel, Jordan, Egypt, New Zealand, Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

The foregoing only scratches the surface of America's place in an increasingly interconnected world. George Washington's strategy made perfect sense at the end of the eighteenth century; it enabled America to build a nation at home. America does not have that luxury today. To continue to build at home, it needs to maintain its primacy abroad. And it can only do so if it has the means, wherewithal and will to defend its interests, and those of its allies and friends, with force if necessary.

America is best at keeping the peace when it maintains its strength. Self-disarmament, coupled with bombast on the one hand and the hesitation to take any action on the other, is a sure-fire invitation to those who would destabilize their neighbors and the international order. The irony of a strategy of avoidance is that the more America abstains from taking the careful but necessary measures to defend its interests, the more it will invite threats to those interests that will drag it into the very circumstances that it has worked to avoid.

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Notes

1. *Washington's Farewell Address 1796, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp*
2. U.S. Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review 2014, p. 6, *http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf*
3. Ibid., p. vii.
4. Ibid., p. vi.
5. Deni, John R.: "Maintaining transatlantic strategic, operational and tactical interoperability in an era of austerity," *International Affairs* 90:3 (2014) p. 584.