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The Problem with the Light Footprint

Shifting Tactics in Lieu of Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the wake of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, President Barack Obama has sought to avoid becoming embroiled in another conventional ground war. To minimize that risk, he has adopted a “light footprint” approach to military intervention: employing standoff strike capabilities and special operations forces, often in support of indigenous ground forces. That approach essentially represents a tactical shift. The United States has continued to attempt to defeat terrorism and promote democratization abroad with military force. Yet those strategic objectives are unlikely to be secured militarily—with either a heavy or light footprint.

The United States should therefore adopt a gradualist, nonmilitary strategy, which conceives of eradicating terrorism and promoting democratization throughout the world as very long-term objectives. Rather than attempting to defeat terrorism on the battlefield, the United States should focus on mitigating the risk of terrorist attacks through improved intelligence and law enforcement. And instead of catalyzing revolutionary democratization, the United States should encourage authoritarian states to introduce gradual liberal reforms—so that democratization is more likely to succeed when it does eventually occur.

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INTRODUCTION

As the United States got bogged down in military quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan, many observers anticipated that war-weariness or an Iraq/Afghanistan syndrome would inhibit U.S. foreign policy in subsequent years.¹

Yet the U.S. intervention in Libya in 2011, as well as the intensifying campaign against the Islamic State, suggests that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have not significantly diminished the United States' propensity to use military force. The lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan have merely prompted the adoption of what has come to be known as the light footprint. The Obama administration has sought to combat foreign security threats with standoff strike capabilities and small contingents of Special Operations Forces, often in support of indigenous ground troops, in lieu of major contingents of U.S. ground troops.

In employing the light footprint, however, the Obama administration has failed to present a clear strategy detailing how those military tools will accomplish the United States' ultimate foreign policy goals. Unfortunately, that strategic deficit has obscured the inherent limitations of the light footprint. Although airstrikes and Special Forces raids may be useful for toppling dictators and decapitating terrorist hierarchies, they contribute little toward the realization of larger political objectives such as the eradication of radical Islamic terrorism or the democratization of the greater Middle East. Given those limitations, Washington should do more than simply tinker with the manner in which it employs military force.

The United States needs to devise a new strategy to combat terrorism and promote democracy throughout the Middle East. After more than a decade of war, it should be clear that those objectives are unlikely to be accomplished with military force. Rather than attempting to defeat terrorism abroad, the United States should therefore focus on improving intelligence and law enforcement capabilities to mitigate the threat of terrorist attacks at home. And rather than attempting to catalyze democratization with military force, the United States should pres-

sure authoritarian regimes to introduce gradual liberal reforms—so that when those countries do eventually democratize, those transitions are more likely to endure. In short, the United States should adopt a less militaristic strategy.

To support these recommendations, I begin by providing an overview of the core elements of the light footprint, as well as the motivation for the Obama administration's adoption of the approach. I then analyze the extent to which the light footprint represents a tactical, rather than a strategic, shift. Following discussion of the benefits and limitations of the light footprint, I conclude by detailing the merits of a gradualist, nonmilitary approach.

OBAMA'S LIGHT FOOTPRINT

Upon entering the White House in 2009, President Obama appeared intent upon putting an end to America's entanglement in foreign military conflicts. He had campaigned vigorously on a pledge to extricate U.S. forces from Iraq, promising, “when I am Commander-in-Chief, I will set a new goal on Day One: I will end this war.” Although he portrayed withdrawal from Iraq as a necessary precondition for refocusing on “the central front of the war against al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” Obama was clearly committed to ending that conflict as well.² In his view, pulling out of Iraq would free up resources that would enable the United States to “finish the job in Afghanistan.”³

Moreover, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have made Obama extremely wary of embarking upon new foreign military adventures. Although he studiously avoided ruling out such eventualities, Obama promised to dispense his responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief with greater pragmatism than his predecessors. To his mind, “The lesson of Iraq is that when we are making decisions about matters as grave as war, we need a policy rooted in reason and facts, not ideology and politics.”⁴ Americans thus had good reason to anticipate that nearly a decade of war would soon be over.

To a surprising extent, however, Obama has struggled to resist the temptation to employ

military force abroad. Following the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the president did refrain from intervening in Syria in support of rebel efforts to topple Bashar al Assad. In March 2011, however, he authorized U.S. participation in a multinational military operation in Libya, which ultimately toppled Muammar el-Qaddafi. Before U.S. forces had completely withdrawn from either Iraq or Afghanistan, the United States was thus engaged in another war (although the administration preferred the euphemism “kinetic action”). Although U.S. forces wrapped up their mission in Libya in relatively short order, the administration was at it again two years later. On September 10, 2014, Obama announced that he had ordered “a systematic campaign of airstrikes” as part of a strategy to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, [The Islamic State].”⁵ All the while, the Obama administration has prosecuted an ongoing campaign in which unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) have been used to strike suspected terrorists in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

As noted above, Obama’s authorization of new military operations in Libya and Iraq/Syria suggests that war-weariness has not substantially diminished the United States’ willingness to use military force. The trials of more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan do, however, appear to have influenced *how* Obama has employed military force by encouraging the adoption of the light footprint—the use of standoff strike capabilities and small contingents of special forces, often in support of allied ground troops.

The defining characteristic of Obama’s light footprint is an extreme aversion to putting “boots on the ground.” Although he reluctantly authorized a military surge in Afghanistan in 2009, the president appears determined not to employ conventional ground troops in new military operations. He has understandably refused to categorically rule out such a possibility in order to preserve flexibility. But the president is clearly averse to authorizing any major ground combat operations. To some extent, that aversion is probably founded upon the widespread perception that Americans are

war-weary, and consequently unwilling to sacrifice the lives of more American service members on foreign crusades.

Casualty-aversion is not, however, the only factor that has dissuaded Obama from dispatching ground troops abroad. It appears as though the bloody aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq fostered a belief that “organic” solutions to foreign conflicts are necessary insofar as the presence of American troops naturally engenders anti-American resistance. On the campaign trail in 2008, for instance, Obama warned that actions such as the invasion of Iraq perversely “fan the flames of extremism and terrorism.”⁶ Nor was that simply campaign rhetoric. That consideration reinforced the administration’s determination not to deploy ground troops to Libya. During deliberations over intervention in Libya, for instance, Obama expressed concern that U.S. intervention could inflame the conflict. He was particularly wary of undermining the nascent Arab Spring by legitimizing the argument made by dictators, such as Qaddafi, that the protest movements sweeping across the region were part of a neo-imperial Western conspiracy to dominate the Middle East and North Africa.⁷ Even though Obama ultimately felt compelled to employ airpower in support of the Libyan rebels, the prospect of deploying ground troops consequently remained anathema. The administration was convinced that the Libyan revolution would be more likely to succeed if Americans were “not around on the ground, where [they] breed resentment.”⁸

Since Obama is loath to employ ground troops, his administration has emphasized the importance of building the military capacity of U.S. partners. In 2010, Defense Secretary Robert Gates asserted that dealing with “fractured or failing states” requires the United States to improve its proficiency in “helping other countries defend themselves or, if necessary, fight alongside U.S. forces by providing them with equipment, training, and other forms of security assistance.”⁹ In other words, the United States should do more to help other countries help themselves.

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The United States' efforts to build the capacity of Iraqi security forces have been a key element of the campaign against the Islamic State. The United States had continued to provide military support to Iraq following the withdrawal of U.S. forces at the end of 2012—primarily through foreign military sales and financing. Yet the rise of the Islamic State prompted the Obama administration to launch a much more intensive effort to train, advise, and assist the Iraqi military. Since December 2014, when Congress appropriated \$1.6 billion for an Iraq Train and Equip Fund, the United States and its coalition partners have trained more than 20,000 Iraqi Security Force personnel. Obama has not limited U.S. security assistance to state partners, however. In 2014, the administration secured congressional approval of a program that aimed to train and equip 5,400 moderate rebels a year to combat the Islamic State in Syria.¹⁰ Although that program has proved an unmitigated failure, it highlights the fact that the administration has sought to circumscribe the U.S. role in foreign conflicts by delegating ground combat to indigenous forces—both state and nonstate.

Although Obama has encouraged U.S. partners to shoulder the burden of engaging in major ground combat, he has demonstrated an enduring willingness to support those forces with American air/naval power. During the first two weeks of the campaign to oust Qaddafi, U.S. pilots conducted 370 strike missions—roughly half the coalition total.¹¹ Although the Obama administration made a point of subsequently relinquishing leadership of the mission to NATO allies, the United States continued to strike Qaddafi's forces with Predator drones until rebel forces succeeded in toppling the regime. In the campaign to degrade and destroy the Islamic State, the Obama administration has employed standoff strike capabilities on an even greater scale. As of April 26, 2016, the United States had executed 11,876 strikes against Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria—an average of about 19 per day.¹²

In addition to airpower, Obama has been willing to deploy small contingents of Special Forces in support of indigenous partners on the ground in Iraq and Syria. Toward the end of Oc-

tober 2015, for instance, the White House announced the deployment of dozens of Special Operations Forces to Syria. Although that announcement created quite a stir in the media, it essentially constituted a public acknowledgment of U.S. Special Operations Forces' longstanding involvement in the campaign against the Islamic State. Not only have those forces provided advice and assistance to rebel forces; they have also conducted occasional unilateral raids against Islamic State targets in both Iraq and Syria.¹³ In essence, the administration has thus adopted a division of labor in which the United States employs standoff strike capabilities in support of regional proxy forces, but remains prepared to employ Special Forces discreetly to eliminate high-value targets.

Such a division of labor is by no means a necessary condition for U.S. military action, however. Obama has shown that he remains prepared to launch standoff strikes independently of regional allies. In his first two years in office, he authorized a dramatic increase in CIA drone strikes against suspected terrorists in Pakistan. Only about 50 such attacks had been launched during the entire tenure of George W. Bush. Obama, in contrast, authorized over 350 drone strikes during his first term.¹⁴ Although the frequency of such strikes in Pakistan has gradually diminished since its peak in 2010, the Obama administration has begun striking targets farther afield, in places such as Yemen and Somalia. Drone strikes have thus become a key element of the administration's counterterrorism strategy.

THE STRATEGIC DEFICIT

It is crucial to recognize that the light footprint is not a strategy. Standoff strike capabilities, Special Operations Forces, and allied ground troops are military tools. Strategy involves conceptualizing how such tools can be employed to achieve specific objectives. Since the tools appropriate for achieving one objective may be totally inappropriate for achieving others, serious thinking about causation is vital. The strategist must estimate: if I employ these

capabilities, in this way, given these circumstances, I will achieve this objective. As military theorist Carl von Clausewitz put it, “the aim will determine the series of actions intended to achieve it.”¹⁵ The light footprint should therefore be employed as a means to particular ends.

To a surprising degree, the Obama administration has attempted to achieve the same strategic objectives as the George W. Bush administration—in particular, the preemption of terrorist threats and the promotion of liberal democracy in the Middle East—with less obtrusive military force. The Obama administration’s use of the light footprint consequently amounts to little more than a tactical shift.

To be fair, military force has never been the sole element of U.S. counterterrorism strategy. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks President Bush adopted a comprehensive strategy in which the United States sought to employ financial instruments to cut off terrorist financing, law enforcement and legal measures to arrest and convict suspected terrorists, and public diplomacy/media to undermine terrorist recruiting and propaganda. Nevertheless, military force has been central to U.S. strategy toward the greater Middle East. In launching a global war on terrorism, Bush sought to eradicate the threat posed by radical Islam largely by conducting preemptive attacks against both known and potential terrorists as well as their state sponsors. By overthrowing the authoritarian regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration sought to foster the construction of democratic governments that would help undermine the supposed root causes of terrorism.

In response to ongoing turmoil in the greater Middle East, the Obama administration essentially defaulted to a revised version of the Bush strategy. Although Obama has conscientiously refrained from speaking of a war on terrorism, he has continued to employ military force as a core element of U.S. counterterrorism strategy. And although Obama deserves credit for long resisting substantial pressure to intervene in the Syrian Civil War, he was unable to resist the temptation to or-

chestrate regime change in Libya. As detailed in the previous section, Obama has distinguished himself from his predecessor primarily in the manner in which he has employed military force—not whether or not to do so.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration’s focus on employing a light footprint has created a situation in which the means are driving the ends. For instance, in announcing the beginning of the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State in September 2014, Obama declared that the administration’s objective was to “degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.”¹⁶ Although that remains the stated objective, it is clear that the limitations of the light footprint have since prompted the administration to scale back its goals. Since indigenous ground forces have proved incapable of destroying the Islamic State (even with the support of U.S. airstrikes), Obama appears to have settled for merely degrading the threat.

A thorough strategic reassessment is consequently in order. It is imperative to evaluate how employing the light footprint (or military force more generally) is likely to advance various U.S. objectives—and just as importantly, how it may militate against the accomplishment of those objectives.

THE FEW BENEFITS OF THE LIGHT FOOTPRINT

There are certainly virtues to Obama’s light footprint. First and foremost, the approach has kept Americans out of harm’s way. During the seven-month allied campaign in Libya, the United States did not suffer a single fatality. As of May 4, 2016, only 16 U.S. service members have died in the course of the campaign against the Islamic State—and only three of those were killed in action.¹⁷ By almost any standard, the two conflicts have imposed an extremely small human cost on the United States.

From the perspective of the Obama administration, the avoidance of U.S. casualties has probably forestalled opposition to the persistent use of U.S. military force abroad. Neither the U.S. intervention in Libya nor that against the Islamic State has engendered much public

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opposition. According to polling data compiled by the Pew Research Center, a plurality in the range of 45 to 50 percent thought it was the right decision “to conduct military air strikes in Libya.”¹⁸ Throughout most of 2015, a majority of Americans also approved of the U.S. military campaign against Islamic militants in Iraq and Syria—even though most felt the campaign was not going well.¹⁹ In fact, Obama has received greater criticism for not striking the Islamic State *more* forcefully than for intervening in the first place.

The Obama administration’s selective use of airstrikes has also accomplished a number of tactical objectives. The allied air campaign in Libya forestalled Qaddafi’s forces’ impending assault on Benghazi without much difficulty. Although there is some debate whether U.S. intervention prevented an impending massacre, continuing offensive air strikes were indispensable in enabling the Libyan rebels to mount an offensive ground campaign that ultimately toppled the Qaddafi regime.²⁰ In only 215 days, the United States was able to remove a brutal dictator at relatively little cost in blood or treasure. At the time, Obama appeared to have good reason to extol that “Without putting a single U.S. servicemember on the ground, we achieved our objectives.”²¹

The campaign to degrade and destroy the Islamic State has already dragged on much longer than the Libya operation, and it has certainly engendered much more criticism. Yet even though the Islamic State has been able to consolidate its control in a number of Sunni areas within Iraq and Syria, U.S. intervention has helped to thwart substantial further territorial expansion. In fact, coalition forces have even succeeded in driving the Islamic State from most of the Kurdish-majority regions in northern Iraq and Syria. Although U.S. air strikes in support of indigenous ground forces have, to this point, proved insufficient to ultimately destroy the Islamic State, they have succeeded in containing it.

Likewise, the Obama administration’s ongoing drone campaign has probably succeeded in disrupting the operations of numerous terrorist organizations. The strikes have decimated

the hierarchy of al Qaeda and its affiliates. According to data compiled by New America, drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen have killed somewhere in the range of 2,649 to 4,061 militants, including more than 100 senior leaders.²² Moreover, the deterrent threat of additional drone attacks has stymied the reconstitution of terrorist training camps in areas such as Pakistan’s Waziristan region, where government control is weak—the types of camps that al Qaeda maintained with relative impunity prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks.²³

THE LIMITS OF THE LIGHT FOOTPRINT

Although the Obama administration’s light footprint has yielded some tactical dividends, the approach entails inherent limitations. Employing standoff strike capabilities, often in support of indigenous ground forces, may be a viable means of preempting and containing terrorist threats, and even overthrowing repugnant dictators. But if the United States’ ultimate goals are to promote the spread of liberal democracy and stability in the greater Middle East, and in so doing to eradicate the root causes of terrorism, those same tools are likely to be of little use.

One of the primary problems with the light footprint is that the United States’ objectives and priorities invariably diverge from those of potential indigenous allies. In Syria, for instance, Obama explained quite clearly that U.S. forces would degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamic State primarily by executing airstrikes in support of indigenous ground forces, including both Iraqi security forces and Syrian rebels.²⁴ Yet the Syrian opposition, which Obama characterized as “the best counterweight to extremists like ISIL,” appears to be much more interested in toppling Assad than in combating the Islamic State. That is the primary reason the administration’s program to train and equip Syrian fighters proved such an abysmal failure.²⁵ Most Syrian rebels were simply unwilling to accede to the administration’s insistence that recruits pledge

to battle only the Islamic State, not Assad. In such circumstances, accomplishing U.S. strategic objectives will be extremely difficult, insofar as success hinges on the contributions of allies who are uninterested in playing the role that Washington casts them in.

Even when indigenous forces' goals do coincide with those of the United States, they are unlikely to be able to develop the capacity to establish and preserve post-conflict stability. That is evident from the U.S. security assistance programs in Iraq and Afghanistan. From 2004 to 2014, the United States devoted more than \$85 billion to training and equipping security forces in those two countries—a level of commitment that is unlikely to be matched in the near future.²⁶ In spite of such massive assistance, the Iraqi and Afghan security forces have remained incapable of preserving peace and stability in the territory under their nominal control. In 2014, the Iraqi security forces collapsed in the face of the Islamic State onslaught through Anbar and Nineveh provinces. Although government forces were able to recapture Ramadi at the close of 2015, they had been unable, as of May 2016, to dislodge Islamic State fighters from strongholds in Mosul and Fallujah. Likewise, the Afghan security forces have struggled to combat the resurgence of the Taliban. That became painfully obvious in October 2015, when several hundred Taliban fighters overwhelmed a 7,000-man government security force and occupied Kunduz, Afghanistan's sixth largest city, for two weeks—a development that prompted Obama to announce that he will keep a minimum of 5,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan through the end of his presidency.²⁷ The reality is that even the most ambitious training programs will rarely enable the security forces at the disposal of newly established governments to impose stability in post-conflict environments characterized by bitter ethno-religious cleavages.

Since many states in the Middle East and North Africa will likely continue to experience substantial difficulty exercising sovereignty and projecting security throughout the territory under their nominal control, it is cer-

tainly tempting for the United States to launch airstrikes (especially using drones) to deny terrorists safe haven in those territories. If other states are either unwilling or unable to do the job, we will. As noted above, the Obama administration's drone campaign appears to have succeeded in decimating the al Qaeda hierarchy and disrupting the operation of terrorist training camps. Unfortunately, terrorist leaders are replaceable. Attempts to decapitate terrorist organizations can disrupt operations, but they are unlikely to cripple such groups. In some cases, eliminating one terrorist leader might perversely empower a new leader who is more radical, influential, or competent.²⁸

Although airstrikes may be useful for disrupting the operation of terrorist organizations, they cannot mitigate the root causes of terrorism. As numerous critics have suggested, the U.S. drone program could actually undermine the campaign to eradicate terrorism by engendering anti-American resentment.²⁹ It is impossible to assess the extent to which drone strikes may be creating new terrorists. But there is no denying that the United States has a serious image problem in many of the countries that spawn anti-American terrorists. According to the 2014 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, only small minorities in countries throughout the greater Middle East view the United States favorably: 10 percent in Egypt, 12 percent in Jordan, 41 percent in Lebanon, 14 percent in Pakistan, and 19 percent in Turkey. Moreover, large majorities of respondents in those countries disapprove of the ongoing U.S. drone campaign: 87 percent in Egypt, 90 percent in Jordan, 71 percent in Lebanon, 66 percent in Pakistan, and 83 percent in Turkey.³⁰ As some observers have noted, opposition to the U.S. drone campaign may not be as widespread as those figures suggest, and the ongoing drone campaign is certainly not the original source of anti-Americanism throughout the region.³¹ Nevertheless, the United States will probably be unable to repair its image throughout the Muslim world as long as the drone strikes continue.

Moreover, as troubling as simmering anti-Americanism throughout the greater Middle

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East may be, the impact of the drone campaign on Muslims living in the West should not be overlooked. Within Muslim communities that already suffer socioeconomic marginalization (particularly within Europe), U.S. drone strikes play into the narrative that the United States and its European allies are at war with Islam. In so doing, the drone campaign has probably contributed to the radicalization of disaffected Muslims living throughout the West. So although drone strikes can successfully disrupt the operations of terrorist organizations abroad, they may perversely stimulate the growth of home-grown terrorists.

THE CASE FOR A GRADUALIST (NONMILITARY) STRATEGY

The limitations of the light footprint suggest that the United States needs to do more than simply alter tactics in pursuit of the same objectives.³² In the wake of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and amidst ongoing strife throughout the greater Middle East, it is imperative to rethink strategy, including both ends and means. After 15 years of warfare, it is abundantly clear that military force can do little to defeat terrorism or catalyze democratization. The United States should therefore adopt a gradualist nonmilitary strategy, which conceives of the eradication of terrorism and the spread of liberal democracy as very long-term goals. Under such a strategy, military force should be used much more sparingly to achieve limited objectives in extraordinary circumstances—such as the operation to kill Osama bin Laden.

Many policymakers do seem to recognize that defeating terrorism is a long-term challenge. As Obama has asserted: “the task of rejecting sectarianism and extremism is a generational task.”³³ The more important point, though, which is often overlooked, is that defeating terrorism cannot be accomplished militarily—with either a heavy or light footprint.³⁴ Since the global war on terrorism is an ideological struggle, it can only be won by undermining the appeal of radical Islam—in essence, by starving terrorist organizations of

foot soldiers willing to die for the cause. To the extent that U.S. military strikes against terrorist targets in the greater Middle East seemingly confirm the narrative of radical Islamists, as detailed in the previous section, they are therefore counterproductive to the ultimate eradication of Islamic terrorism.

Since the ideology of Islamic extremism cannot be defeated militarily, it is tempting to focus instead on eradicating the root causes of terrorism. Unfortunately, we still do not possess a strong understanding of what those root causes are. Politicians and pundits have pointed to factors such as poverty, poor education, social marginalization, and political repression. But a growing body of research has failed to generate any consensus that any of those factors do, in fact, drive terrorism.³⁵ That is not to say that the United States should not promote economic development, political liberalization, or educational reform throughout the greater Middle East—or, for that matter, the socioeconomic assimilation of Muslim immigrants living in Western countries. Those are worthy endeavors, which deserve the United States’ attention. But we should temper our expectations that their gradual accomplishment will do much to diminish the threat of terrorism in the near term.

Rather than trying to eradicate terrorism, the United States should focus on mitigating the threat of terrorist attacks through intelligence and law enforcement. Those are domains in which the United States has had a fair amount of success. Since September 11, 2001, law enforcement is known to have foiled 53 potential attacks against U.S. targets (most of which were embryonic, half-baked plots).³⁶ At most, Islamic terrorists have only committed nine successful terrorist attacks within the United States over the past 14 years; those attacks resulted in 45 deaths.³⁷ In recent years, European countries have suffered much more devastating attacks than the United States: 191 people died in the 2004 Madrid train bombings, 56 died in the 2005 London bombings, 137 died in the November 2015 Paris attacks, and at least 35 died in the March 2016 attacks in Brussels. Unfortunately, those dramatic attacks have obscured the fact that U.S. law enforcement and

intelligence agencies have been quite effective—thanks, in part, to the incompetence of most would-be terrorists. Because people instinctively pay more attention to the few sensational attacks that do occur than those that are thwarted or never materialize, most Americans overestimate the threat posed by Islamic terrorists.³⁸

Despite their successes, law enforcement and intelligence agencies certainly have room for improvement. Better cooperation amongst security services is clearly necessary. A number of the perpetrators of successful attacks were on different countries' radars, but evaded apprehension due to poor intelligence sharing (both domestically and internationally). Prior to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, for instance, information supplied by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) prompted the United States to place Tamerlan Tzarnaev on its terrorism watch list. Yet the FSB failed to respond to FBI requests for additional intelligence, and the FBI, in turn, failed to share its intelligence with local law enforcement in Boston. The result was that Tzarnaev avoided greater scrutiny.³⁹ Likewise, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the mastermind of the November 2015 Paris attacks, was on a Belgian watch list, having been suspected of involvement in four previous plots that had been foiled. Because of poor intelligence sharing amongst European agencies, however, Abaaoud was able to stay a step ahead of law enforcement in traveling back and forth between Europe and Syria.⁴⁰ Such intelligence failures can never be completely eliminated. Improving domestic and international counterterrorism coordination can, however, further reduce the threat of terrorism at little cost. Rather than throwing more money and resources at the problem, improved cooperation will enable the United States and its allies to get more bang for the buck from their existing programs.

Much like defeating terrorism, the institutionalization of liberal democracy throughout the globe is a long-term challenge—a challenge that has become one of the United States' primary foreign policy objectives in the post-Cold War era. In 1995, the Clinton administration's first National Security Strategy asserted

that “All of America’s strategic interests—from promoting prosperity at home to checking global threats abroad before they threaten our territory—are served by enlarging the community of democratic and free market nations.”⁴¹ Since then, the Bush and Obama administrations have both embraced that same objective. In his second inaugural address in 2005, Bush affirmed that “it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”⁴² Six years later, following the eruption of the Arab Spring, Obama echoed those sentiments, pledging that “it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy.”⁴³

There is nothing inherently wrong with highlighting the spread of democracy as a major foreign policy objective. That goal is consistent with the norms and values on which the American political system is founded. Democratization would almost surely improve the lives of millions of people living under authoritarianism around the world by endowing them with civil liberties and political rights that we in the West often take for granted. In the long run, the spread of democracy could also potentially produce a more peaceful world. If democratic peace theory holds, an increase in the number of democratic states should reduce the incidence of interstate conflict. Given those potential benefits, democratization is an entirely worthy foreign policy goal.

The problem is that American leaders consistently fail to recognize (or accept) the limits on their ability to accomplish that objective—particularly limits associated with the use of military force. They frequently pay lip service to such limits, insisting “this is not primarily the task of arms,”⁴⁴ or “we will be wary of efforts to impose democracy through military force.”⁴⁵ Too often, however, U.S. actions defy those protestations, as U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya demonstrates. It is therefore high time for policymakers to practice the restraint that they preach.

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After more than a decade of war, the United States should desist from promoting violent regime change in highly fractionalized states. The simple fact is that foreign-imposed regime change rarely catalyzes sustainable democratization in poor, ethnically diverse societies—in other words, the type of country in which the United States is most tempted to intervene.⁴⁶ In fact, helping to install new leaders in such countries is likely to increase the risk of civil war, regardless of whether American troops are on the ground.⁴⁷ Rather than merely reducing the size of the U.S. footprint, while remaining committed to the same goal, the United States should stop promoting revolutionary democratization altogether and instead focus on encouraging evolutionary change.

One of the primary reasons that democratization fails (at least at first) in so many countries is that authoritarian regimes typically suppress the development of civil society, which is a foundational element of any successful democracy. In Libya, for instance, Qaddafi had stifled the development of any truly national institutions, including the military, which might have posed a threat to his authority. After his downfall, new leaders consequently had to build a functional state almost from scratch. Having failed to develop any collective Libyan identity, it is unsurprising that rival factions have been unable to work cooperatively on that endeavor. In essence, the lack of any democratic experience renders the consolidation of democracy extremely difficult.

Rather than orchestrating the overthrow of authoritarian regimes, the United States should focus on encouraging, cajoling, and pressuring such regimes to gradually introduce more democratic norms and institutions—most notably, the rule of law, civil liberties, and nongovernmental/civic organizations. By encouraging the development of relatively vibrant civil society, the United States can potentially increase the probability that democracy takes hold when authoritarian states do attempt to transition to democracy. In theory, refocusing on that objective should be quite feasible, since the United States already does much to promote political liberalization

throughout the world—for example, discouraging authoritarian rule through the imposition of economic and political sanctions, offering trade incentives to encourage political liberalization, funneling democracy aid through nongovernmental organizations, and financing election monitoring.⁴⁸

The recent elections in Burma suggest that such gradual pressure can work. For the past five decades, a military junta has exercised authoritarian control over every sphere of Burmese society. Following the junta’s suppression of popular protests in 1988, the United States imposed increasingly harsh economic and political sanctions in response to recurring violations of Burmese citizens’ political and human rights. For years, those sanctions appeared to have little effect. Over the past five years, however, the Burmese regime has permitted a number of important democratic reforms. In 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi, the head of Burma’s National League for Democracy (NLD), was freed from house arrest. Under the leadership of Thein Sein, a former general who assumed power in 2011, the Burmese regime freed most political prisoners, relaxed media censorship, and conducted a series of relatively free parliamentary elections. As a result of those reforms, the NLD was able to secure a parliamentary majority in last November’s parliamentary elections—in so doing, earning the right to form a new government. Burma’s democratic transition is certainly imperfect and reversible. The military will continue to exercise substantial control because of provisions in the constitution it passed through a rigged referendum in 2008. Moreover, low-level ethnic violence still percolates within Burma’s border territories. Nevertheless, recent developments suggest that sustained pressure (both domestic and international) can foster gradual, relatively peaceful democratization.⁴⁹

Burma’s gradual democratization will surely not be replicable everywhere. Previous research has found that military dictatorships are typically more willing than other types of authoritarian regimes to relinquish power voluntarily.⁵⁰ Particularly in personalist dictatorships, authoritar-

ian regimes do things like censor the media, ban nongovernmental political organizations, and imprison political dissidents in order to suppress potential threats to their authority. In order to build a strong support base, many dictators also bestow a range of lucrative political favors upon narrow sociopolitical groups. Insofar as they view their political survival as dependent upon such policies, international pressure is unlikely to prompt authoritarian rulers to abolish institutional corruption or dramatically relax restrictions on citizens' personal liberties.

Policymakers should therefore accept that the United States' ability to catalyze gradual democratization is extremely limited, and however hard the United States might try to encourage gradual democratization, many authoritarian regimes will end with a revolutionary bang. In those cases, the United States should resist the temptation to play kingmaker because the individuals and groups that Washington might like to see empowered will often be incapable of brokering durable political settlements in post-revolutionary societies. Establishing stable, legitimate new governments is something that societies must accomplish themselves.⁵¹ When the dust settles, the United States can, and should, use all the leverage at its disposal, from economic sanctions to democracy aid, to encourage new regimes to institutionalize democratic reforms—but U.S. policymakers should recognize that democratization is an evolutionary process.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, the Bush administration's interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were clearly flawed, if not completely ill-advised. To many Americans, the primary benefit of the two quagmires was the development of an Iraq/Afghanistan syndrome. They anticipated that "war-weariness" or the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan would induce greater restraint in U.S. foreign policy. Yet that expectation is proving to be somewhat unjustified. Like his predecessor, Obama has continued to employ military force to effect regime change and preempt terrorist threats, but he has sought to circumscribe the

risks of military operations by employing a light footprint—the use of standoff strike capabilities and small contingents of Special Operations Forces in support of indigenous ground forces. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have thus influenced U.S. decisionmaking on *how* to use military force to a much greater extent than *whether* to do so.

Unfortunately, the light footprint merely constitutes a tactical shift. The Obama administration has attempted to accomplish the same objectives—democratization in the greater Middle East and the eradication of Islamic terrorism—with slightly different military tools. Yet airstrikes and Special Forces raids are no more likely to accomplish those goals than were the large-scale invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Limited military operations can be useful for disrupting terrorist organizations and overthrowing authoritarian regimes. They are of little use, however, in promoting the development of stable democracies or the eradication of the root causes of terrorism. In fact, the ongoing use of military force may perversely spawn the creation of new terrorists by confirming the narrative that the West is at war with Islam. The turmoil that has followed the U.S. interventions in Libya and Iraq/Syria thus highlights the need for a new strategy, not just different military tactics.

It is high time to abandon the crusade to defeat terrorism and foster democratization with military force. Rather than encouraging revolutionary democratization, the United States should focus on pressuring and enticing dictatorial regimes to introduce gradual liberal reforms so that when those countries do eventually transition from authoritarianism democracy is more likely to flourish. And because neither democratization nor military force is likely to eliminate the threat of Islamic terrorism, Washington should focus on mitigating that threat through intelligence and law enforcement—areas in which the United States has been relatively successful. The indeterminacy of such a gradualist approach may be unappealing to many Americans. But after more than a decade of war, it is time to recognize the inherent limits of U.S. power.

“After more than a decade of war, it is time to recognize the inherent limits of U.S. power.”

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