

Wars to Stay Out Of

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Most people desire peace, but not Washington policy wonks. Safely ensconced in well-appointed offices throughout the nation's capital, a network of neoconservatives, leftish Wilsonians, and liberal hawks yearn for war. While they presumably don't actually enjoy the killing involved, most of them have never met a war they didn't want America to enter. And conflict is "good for business" as they peddle foreign policy advice.

The U.S. enters 2011 mired in a foolish nation-building campaign in Afghanistan. The terrorists who organized 9/11 are long gone, but Americans are dying needlessly in a vain attempt to create liberal democracy in Central Asia.

U.S. forces also remain on station in Iraq, largely out of action but vulnerable if that nation slides back into widespread civil strife. Americans provide a tripwire so the well-heeled South Koreans don't have to burden themselves providing more for their own defense against the unpredictable North.

The American military garrisons Europe and Japan as well, defending these populous and prosperous friends who prefer to spend their money on domestic pursuits. And U.S. troops are involved as trainers, advisers, or long-range combatants in a number of other nations, including Colombia, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen.

These would seem to be more than enough conflicts and commitments for a nation that faces only minimal security threats after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Spending almost as much as the rest of the world combined on the military and allied with every major industrialized state save China and Russia, the U.S. dominates the globe. Americans have done far more than their fair share. They deserve a rest.

But they won't get one if Washington's faux warriors get their way.

Foreign Policy magazine recently listed 16 potential conflicts, cited by the International Crisis Group. In many cases hostile embers are glowing. With a little malicious encouragement or a bit of bad luck, widespread violence, civil discord, and full-scale war could result.

Colombia is a tribute to the failure of American drug policy. U.S. demand has enriched foreign drug cartels which have undermined fragile Third World states. In recent years the Colombian government has successfully fragmented drug organizations but only modestly reduced drug supplies; unfortunately, paramilitary soldiers have been strengthening new drug gangs, increasing violence. Moreover, the communist FARC guerrillas remain active and could grow stronger in league with drug producers.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the world's most tragic nations. Once known as Zaire, the DRC was ravaged by a five-year war involving several of its neighbors, killing perhaps 4.5 million people. That conflict ended in 2003, but fighting continues in eastern areas of this large, ramshackle country. There is little reason to expect the situation to improve, and good reason to fear that it will deteriorate.

Drug cartels based in Mexico have been expanding into Guatemala, with even weaker state institutions. The mandate of Guatemala's anti-corruption watch-dog, the International Commission against Impunity, runs out in 2011 and the August presidential election is likely to feature a badly divided field. Guatemala may surmount all of these challenges, or maybe not.

After years of strong-man rule, followed by a coup and intra-junta strife, Guinea is attempting to follow a democratic path. The newly elected president was inaugurated in December, but the military's influence remains strong. The first year is likely to be critical in determining Guinea's future course.

Haiti is a perpetually failed state. In early 2010 a devastating earthquake killed some 300,000 people, and another million remain homeless. Fraud-tainted presidential elections were held in November, with a run-off scheduled for January 2011. Total social collapse is a perpetual possibility.

Iraq is less violent than four years ago, but it recently won the dubious distinction as the nation going the longest without a new government. The Maliki regime is both abusive and weak, subject to Iranian pressure, and ill-equipped to restrain rising sectarian violence. If the Sunni minority feels disenfranchised, some may return to violent opposition.

A stolen election plagues the Ivory Coast, or Cote d'Ivoire. While the recent presidential campaign was messy, former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara was widely believed to have defeated President Laurent Gbagbo. But the latter, with the support of the military, declared he had won. Both men took the oath of office and named governments; full-scale civil war is possible.

Lebanon was once a peaceful commercial oasis in the Middle East. But a bitter civil war and subsequent war with Israel wrecked this tragic land in the 1970s and 1980s. Although largely recovered from those conflicts, the country continues to suffer from deep and complex sectarian divisions. A replay of the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah is possible while the international investigation of the murder of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri threatens the delicate power-sharing agreement forged in 2008. Renewed conflict could drag in Syria and Iran as well as Israel.

Another victim of Americans' voracious appetite for drugs despite Washington's failed attempt at prohibition is Mexico. The cartels employ more guards than the government has soldiers. Roughly 15,000 people have died so far this year in fighting that has spilled

over the border into the U.S. Despite \$400 million in annual aid from America, Mexico appears to be losing ground to the traffickers.

Nigeria is in perpetual crisis, with fraudulent elections, an insurgency in the oil-rich Niger Delta, efforts to impose Sharia law in the majority-Muslim north, and bloody sectarian strife between Muslims and Christians in country's mixed midriff. In 2010 the president, who for a time was mysteriously absent from the country seeking medical treatment, died. Elections are scheduled for 2011; the vice president turned president is seeking a full term, which threatens to upset the informal system of regional rotation in office.

Pakistan is a permanently near-failed state. The civilian government is incompetent and weak; Islamabad's recent assault on domestic Islamic militants has been half-hearted; the military retains disproportionate political power; the intelligence services have played a perpetual double game in neighboring Afghanistan. Some day the worst might finally happen in this nuclear-armed state.

Perhaps the world's most thoroughly failed state is Somalia. An unpopular UN-backed "transitional" government backed by even more unpopular African Union troops is battling Islamic militias for control of Mogadishu. The militant group al-Shabab already controls most of south and central Somalia and initiated bombing attacks in Uganda, in retaliation for its contribution to the AU force. The situation is only likely to worsen.

Sudan has suffered through two decades of war, costing more than a million lives. A peace agreement in 2005 ended large-scale combat. But southerners, largely Christian and animist, still chafe under rule by the majority-Muslim north. A January referendum on independence for the south could spark renewed conflict, especially since the ill-defined border between north and south falls atop a large oil field.

Impoverished Tajikistan hosts one of the world's more corrupt and less competent governments. Islamic insurgents, some who fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan, have become active in Tajikistan. The authoritarian state has so far proved unable to cope, and the country could become a corridor for Central Asian Islamic insurgencies.

In Venezuela President Hugo Chavez is attempting to use legal and semi-legal means to create a dictatorial state. He has wrecked the economy and squandered public monies, and faces growing popular discontent. He lost legislative elections in September and could lose the presidential election in 2012. Many doubt he will go peacefully.

After Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe stole the 2008 election, he was pressed to form a "unity" government, appointing his opponent, Morgan Tsvangirai, prime minister. But Mugabe has maintained control of the military and security services, and said he intends to dump Tsvangirai and hold elections in 2011. Mugabe undoubtedly hopes to steal this poll through the same coercive tactics employed by his party three years ago. Mugabe's lieutenants already have charged Tsvangirai with treason after revelations that he privately favored international sanctions against Mugabe's kleptocracy.

Particularly striking is how different these situations are—and how little the U.S. can do to fix them. The world always has been a turbulent, messy place. The regions that Americans care most about—Europe and East Asia—have become more peaceful. But instability remains a constant elsewhere.

The Latin American nations are of greatest geographical interest to the U.S. Yet it is America's myopic policy of drug prohibition that is causing many of their troubles. And Washington already provides most of these troubled governments with financial and military aid. Unfortunately, U.S. policymakers cannot fix incompetent and corrupt systems which waste or misuse much of the money received.

Islamic militancy is of concern in Pakistan, Somalia, and Tajikistan, but the U.S. becomes a target when it unnecessarily intervenes in these conflicts. American activities in Pakistan already have turned the Pakistan-Taliban's antagonisms toward the U.S., while some young Somali-Americans have become radicalized over Washington's support for an outside invasion force which has wreaked war on Somalis in the name of defending them. Ending America's involvement in Afghanistan would be the quickest way to reduce anti-American feelings in Pakistan. Ending support for a "transitional" government which represents no one in Somalia would reduce U.S. exposure there.

Moreover, most of these incipient conflicts are matters of purely humanitarian concern. What matters in Guinea, Haiti, the Ivory Coast, Lebanon, and Zimbabwe, among others, has only minimal security relevance to the U.S. Thus, these countries warrant attention, not intervention. A serious attempt to forcibly remake the world would force young Americans to garrison the globe in a state of perpetual war.

Anyway, given the mess made by U.S. officials after nine years of war in Afghanistan, there is no reason to expect them to fix countries as disparate as Congo, Mexico, Nigeria, Sudan, and Haiti. In fact, Washington has achieved nothing after a century of multiple interventions in the latter; in recent years the U.S. forcibly installed one president and then, a decade later, defenestrated him.

Social engineering is difficult enough at home. Transforming complex societies is well-nigh impossible.

The U.S. government should dedicate itself to peace. Washington's foreign policy elite sees the prospect of more conflicts and wars as reason for ever more international meddling and ever larger military forces. The American people must insist that the prospect of more foreign conflicts makes it even more important for the U.S. to follow a policy of nonintervention and peace. The best way to keep the nation secure is to avoid involvement in unnecessary wars.