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Doug Bandow: U.S. doing too much and doing it badly

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At West Point, President Barack Obama found it hard to defend the incoherent mess representing his foreign policy. The president has resisted persistent neoconservative demands for multiple new wars and interventions. But he usually rushed to the inconsistent middle, entangling the U.S. unnecessarily without achieving even his limited ends.

Despite sharp criticism of his speech from the right, Barack Obama got a lot right. For instance, the constant complaint by uber-hawks that the world is dangerous misses the fact that the world is not that dangerous for the U.S.

“By most measures, America has rarely been stronger relative to the rest of the world,” not the president. Indeed. “Our military has no peer,” he said. “The odds of a direct threat against us by any nation are low, and do not come close to the dangers we faced during the Cold War.”

Yet Barack Obama failed to answer the obvious question: Why does America spend so much on “defense” when it has so little to defend against? In fact, the Department of Defense has little to do with protecting America and mostly with subsidizing prosperous and populous allies in Asia and Europe, which have become the international equivalent of welfare queens.

The president did point to “new dangers,” such as terrorism, the most serious ongoing security threat to the U.S. However, terrorists do not target Americans because we are so free, but because our government bombs, invades and occupies – and otherwise intervenes all over the globe. This is not to justify, but to understand. The more Washington intervenes, the more it exposes its citizens to terrorist threats.

The president warned that Moscow’s aggressive actions have unnerved “capitals in Europe” – which he failed to acknowledge has a collective GDP and population bigger than America’s and much bigger than Russia’s. Barack Obama cited China’s growing economy and “military reach” which “worries its neighbors.” But Beijing has neither the

ability nor desire to battle America. China's neighbors should develop the means to defend themselves.

As was inevitable, President Obama attacked the straw man of "isolationism." Yet the president inadvertently articulated an argument for nonintervention when he spoke movingly of promoting a "world of greater freedom and tolerance" while adding "to say that we have an interest in pursuing peace and freedom beyond our borders is not to say that every problem has a military solution."

President Obama's strongest criticism was reserved for neoconservatives. The president pointed out that "Since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures – without thinking through the consequences; without building international support and legitimacy for our action, or leveling with the American people about the sacrifice required."

He rightly emphasized the importance of empowering other nations to combat terrorism. But his most detailed example, Afghanistan, was a poor one.

Attempting to create a competent, honest, and efficient central government in Kabul was a worthy but not particularly realistic goal, and certainly not one worth thousands of American lives and hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars. Far less costly would be ensuring that all combatants in a conflict like Afghanistan understand that cooperating with al-Qaida or other terrorist bands ensures terrible retaliation.

In calling for support for democracy President Obama ignored Washington's flagrant hypocrisy. For instance, he said of Egypt: "We have not cut off cooperation with the new government."

For three decades the U.S. subsidized a brutal dictatorship. When President Mohammed Morsi was overthrown, Washington refused to admit that a coup had occurred and then follow the law, which required cutting off aid. Since then Secretary of State John Kerry has declared the military regime to be restoring democracy even as it was shooting protesters, imprisoning thousands of opponents, torturing those detained, and sentencing hundreds of people to death in mass trials.

Far better than such unprincipled "cooperation" would be nonengagement.

The president closed with a call for global leadership and an ability to "see the world as it should be – a place where the aspirations of individual human beings matter." But real leadership requires humility, prudence and wisdom in pursuing that dream. The ultimate folly is treating people as infinitely malleable, to be shaped and molded against their will through a few bombing runs, an occasional invasion, or a thorough military occupation.

President Obama has exhibited caution where the neoconservatives demanded conflict. He should have forthrightly embraced a policy of more consistent nonintervention.

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