

Barack Obama's Feckless and Foolish Foreign Policy: Doing Too Much And Doing It Badly

By Doug Bandow
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President Barack Obama enjoyed one of the prerogatives of his office when he spoke at West Point. There may be no better setting for a speech on foreign policy. But it wasn't easy to defend the incoherent mess representing his administration's dealings with the world.

The problem is not that the president had no successes to defend—he has resisted persistent neoconservative demands for multiple new wars and interventions. But President Obama almost always rushed to the inconsistent middle ground, entangling the U.S. unnecessarily without committing enough to achieve even his limited ends. Experience demonstrates that Uncle Sam rarely succeeds at being a little bit pregnant. When it comes to military action, chastity more often is the best strategy.

Despite sharp criticism of his speech on the right, Barak 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.* During the Cold War American school children were trained to get under their desks in response to a Soviet missile launch. Military strategists debated how to stop Soviet armored divisions from pouring through Germany's Fulda Gap. The two superpowers tested and prodded one another in bloody proxy wars in Afghanistan, Angola, Korea, Nicaragua, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Washington and Moscow risked nuclear war over Cuba.

That world is gone. The U.S. dominates the globe. Noted the president: “by most measures, America has rarely been stronger relative to the rest of the world. Those who argue otherwise—who suggest that America is in decline, or has seen its global leadership slip away—are either misreading history or engaged in partisan politics. Think about it. Our military has no peer. 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 confront the obvious implication of this fact: 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 far more to do with imposing Washington's

wishes, aspirations, and even whims on the rest of the world. To the extent “defense” is involved, it is primarily defense of others, most obviously prosperous and populous allies in Asia and Europe, which have become the international equivalent of welfare queens.

The president does point to “new dangers.” However, some result from Washington’s promiscuous interference in other nations’ affairs. Most affect allied nations far more than America.

For instance, President Obama cited 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, occupies, and otherwise intervenes all over the globe. This is not to justify, but to understand. Similar has been the experience of Russia, Israel, Pakistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka, India, and other nations which have been attacked by terrorists for reasons other than their liberality. Terrorism typically is a weapon in an ongoing political conflict—awful, immoral, unjustified, but predictable. Thus, the more Washington intervenes, the more it exposes its citizens to terrorist threats. Terrorism is a cost of global hegemony and promiscuous intervention.

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. Why should Washington defend *China’s neighbors’* territorial claims? Wouldn’t it make more sense for China’s neighbors to develop the means to defend those claims themselves?

As was inevitable, President Obama attacked the straw man of “isolationism,” even though it’s hard to find a true isolationist in Washington. What the president calls isolationists are those who view military action as a last resort, and who believe that the mere fact there might be consequences of events abroad, whether the civil war in Syria or Russian absorption of Crimea, does not justify U.S. military action.

Indeed, the president inadvertently articulated an argument for nonintervention. He noted: “I believe we have a real stake—an abiding self-interest—in making sure our children grow up in a world where school-girls are not kidnapped; where individuals aren’t slaughtered because of tribe or faith or political beliefs. I believe that the world of greater freedom and tolerance is not only a moral imperative—it also helps keep us safe.”

These are wonderful ideals and worth pursuing if practicable and at reasonable cost. But as Barack Obama noted in his next sentence: “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.” Which is precisely the point of those who argue against intervening in Nigeria to rescue kidnapped school girls, intervening in Syria, to halt a civil war, and intervening all over the world to promote freedom and tolerance.

President Obama’s strongest criticism was reserved for neoconservatives who had hectored him at every turn demanding more wars and threats of war. Their philosophy can be summarized

as: “Circle the globe. Find interesting people. Kill them.” 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.” In fact, that describes almost all of Washington’s military recent misadventures.

Barack Obama set forth his criteria for use of the military. “When our core interests demand it,” he said. But what are those interests? “When our people are threatened,” yes. “When our livelihood is at stake,” not so obvious. Economic convenience and expense are different from economic prosperity and survival. “When the security of our allies is in danger,” no.

The purpose of alliances should be to advance U.S. security, not subsidize countries which prefer to let a superpower defend them. Washington should not hand out security guarantees like hotels leave chocolates on guest pillows. America should go to war in response to a threat to allies only when it also *poses a threat to vital U.S. security interests* which cannot be resolved by the allied state.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization illustrates the problem. President Obama lauded NATO’s past role, in a Cold War world which has disappeared, and said “we are now working with NATO allies to meet new missions—within Europe, where our Eastern allies must be reassured; and also beyond Europe’s borders, where our allies must pull their weight.” However, concocting new missions for an organization which fulfilled its purpose brings to mind Public Choice economics, and the institutional incentive for self-preservation, irrespective of circumstance. NATO was created to prevent Soviet domination of Eurasia. The alliance succeeded. Completely.

There is no reason now to add reassuring Eastern European states to Washington’s long list of international duties. The Soviet Union has dissolved. The Warsaw Pact has disappeared. The Europeans have recovered from World War II. If the Eastern Europeans must be reassured, then that job should go to a European continent which has united and collectively surpassed America in wealth and population. Basic economic incentives and human nature ensure that the Europeans will *never* carry their own weight so long as Washington insists on doing the job for them.

The president rightly emphasized the importance of empowering other nations to combat terrorism. But his most detailed example, Afghanistan, was a poor one. Washington has spent more than a dozen years nation-building, trying to create a competent, honest, efficient, democratic, and strong central government in Kabul to govern the rest of the country. That’s a worthy but not particularly realistic goal, and certainly not one worth thousands of American lives and hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars. In fact, nation-building hasn’t worked well anywhere, including in Haiti, Iraq, and Somalia. Far less costly would be ensuring that all combatants in a conflict like Afghanistan understand that cooperating with al-Qaeda or other terrorist bands would be the one sure means of bringing Washington back, with terrible results for those in power.

President Obama offered a high opinion of international institutions, such as the United Nations, not warranted by past experience. He argued that so-called foreign aid is “part of what makes us strong,” despite the long and tortured history of government-to-government financial transfers which have subsidized both collectivism and authoritarianism. And in calling for support for democracy he ignored Washington’s flagrant, consistent, and embarrassing hypocrisy. For instance, he said: “In Egypt, we acknowledge that our relationship is anchored in security interests—from the peace treaty with Israel, to shared efforts against violent extremism. So we have not cut off cooperation with the new government. But we can and will persistently press for the reforms that the Egyptian people have demanded.”

The president was deceiving himself if that’s what he believed Washington to be doing. For three decades succeeding U.S. administrations subsidized a brutal dictatorship which tortured its citizens, looted its country, and persecuted its religious minorities. When the government of President Hosni Mubarak tottered the Obama administration first supported him, then advocated his negotiated departure. After he was ousted the U.S. endorsed the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohammed Morsi, Egypt’s first elected president.

When the latter was overthrown in a coup Washington refused to admit the obvious, that a coup had occurred, and 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 down hundreds of protestors, imprisoning tens of thousands of demonstrators, journalists, students, and others, abusing and torturing those detained, and sentencing hundreds of people to death in mass Soviet-style trials. Along the way the administration resumed shipment of military equipment and provision of military aid.

Far better than such unprincipled “cooperation” would be nonengagement. Washington should stop making demands which will be ignored, issuing pronouncements which will be dismissed, and handing over cash which will be misused. Where there is no good option the U.S. should choose none of the above.

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.” Indeed. But real leadership requires discretion, humility, prudence, judgment, wisdom, and much more in pursuing that dream. The ultimate folly is the belief that people are infinitely malleable, that Americans have been anointed to shape and mold humanity against its will, and that there is nothing which cannot be achieved through a few bombing runs, an occasional invasion, and a thorough military occupation. Real leadership means being prepared not to get involved. Real leadership means not being flattered into war by other states proclaiming America’s indispensability in solving their problems. Real leadership means allowing, indeed, expecting, others to take control of their own destinies.

Foreign policy is a difficult business. In practice the administration has been foolish and feckless, often blundering along even when it has made the right decision, such as not to attack Syria.

But the biggest danger that we face is from those who would more efficiently take America in the wrong direction. Give President Obama credit: he has exhibited caution where the neoconservatives demanded conflict. He would have done even better had he forthrightly embraced a policy of more consistent nonintervention.

At West Point, President Obama rightly criticized the uber-hawks. But more restraint is needed in US foreign policy.

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