



US security retrenchment: the first effects of a modest shift

Ted Galen Carpenter, 17/3/2014

There are abundant signs that the halcyon days of US military intervention around the world may be coming to an end. Not only did Washington execute a complete withdrawal of its troops from Iraq, but the seemingly endless war in Afghanistan is drawing to a close, and even the goal of keeping a small residual force in that country appears to be fading. The Obama administration's latest defense budget proposal ends the robust annual increases in spending that have been the norm since the 9-11 terrorist attacks. Indeed, the projected number of ground forces would be the lowest since the eve of World War II.

Those changes have led politicians and pundits in the United States and in many allied countries to speculate, indeed fret, that America is about to embrace "isolationism." As various foreign policy scholars have pointed out, however, that term is a vacuous slur that has been used repeatedly over the decades to stifle healthy debate about the nature of America's role in the world. Contrary to the latest upsurge of such fears and warnings, the United States is not about to become a hermit republic and wall itself off from the rest of the world. A more selective, restrained role, however, is now highly probable, reflecting growing financial constraints on the US government and the wishes of a war-weary public that has learned some hard, painful lessons. That shift will affect various regions of the world in different ways.

One area where the US tendency to intervene militarily is already on the decline is the Middle East/Southwest Asia. Washington's frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful crusades in Iraq and Afghanistan have had a noticeable impact on the attitudes of the American people. Public opinion surveys over the past two years indicate that a majority of respondents now believe that both wars were a mistake. That outcome is more surprising and significant regarding Afghanistan than Iraq. Once the intelligence reports that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction proved false, Americans soon concluded that the Iraq intervention was a war of choice - and a bad choice at that. But the Afghanistan war was a direct response to the 9-11 attacks. For the American people to turn against that mission suggests not only war weariness, but a growing belief that putting the US military at risk in an attempt to change the Muslim world is a fool's errand. That same belief drove the overwhelming public opposition to the Obama administration's proposed intervention in the Syrian civil war.

Just as the disastrous experience in Vietnam inoculated the American republic against similar interventions in Southeast Asia, the Iraq and Afghanistan debacles will likely make both the public and future administrations wary of extended missions in the Muslim world. Short, sharp punitive expeditions in response to terrorist attacks will remain an option, but extended

deployments, much less amorphous nation-building missions, will be increasingly improbable. The surge of oil and gas production in the United States is even making the “petroleum justification” for extensive US involvement in the Middle East far less compelling than it seemed in the past.

Before the onset of the Ukraine crisis, it appeared likely that Europe was another arena where the US security role would shrink. Except for the turmoil in the former Yugoslavia and the brief dust up between Russia and Georgia in 2008, Europe’s security environment has been gratifyingly quiescent since the end of the Cold War. With the demise of the Soviet Union there certainly was no credible great power expansionist threat. In response to the changed conditions, Washington reduced its troop presence from some 300,000 in the late 1980s to fewer than 70,000. Calls from US leaders for the European allies to take more responsibility for the region’s security and bear a greater share of NATO’s collective defense obligations grew more insistent.

At a meeting of NATO defense ministers on February 26, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel warned his counterparts that they must step up their commitment to the Alliance or watch it become irrelevant. Rebalancing NATO’s “burden-sharing and capabilities,” Hagel stressed, “is mandatory, not elective.” And lest his colleagues miss the unobvious hint that the United States intended to shift much of the collective security burden to Europe, he added: “America’s contributions in NATO remain starkly disproportionate, so adjustments [i.e. reductions] in the US defense budget cannot become an excuse for further cuts in European defense spending.”

Moscow’s drive to annex Crimea, and the Kremlin’s overall menacing posture toward Ukraine, has altered the European security dynamic to some extent, but the long-term change in US policy may prove less dramatic than one might anticipate. It is a stretch to portray Russia with its aging, declining population, a military with many antiquated components, and possessing merely the world’s eighth largest economy as posing a security threat equivalent to one the Soviet Union could muster in its heyday.

Furthermore, although political and policy elites in the United States are agitated by recent developments and focus on ways to punish Russia for its actions, the American public shows no eagerness to embark on a new Cold War. Senator John McCain thunders that the United States should provide “massive” military aid to Kiev, and even more moderate political figures insist on the need to impose punishing economic sanctions and possibly make a show of military force in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea. But a new Pew Research poll reveals a very different public attitude. Most Americans, including majorities in all three major political factions - Republicans, Democrats, and independents - believe that the United States should stay out of the Ukraine crisis. Since a whopping 61% of independents adopt that view, office seekers ignore that perspective at their peril.

While there is likely to be a more limited, restrained US military role in both Europe and the Muslim world, there is one region where there are few signs of even a modest retrenchment: East Asia. Indeed, that is one area of the world where Washington’s security presence may even increase modestly. The Obama administration’s announced “rebalancing” or strategic pivot to East Asia in 2009 reflected uneasiness about China’s growing military capabilities and overall regional influence. China remains a crucial US economic partner, and few American opinion

leaders favor an openly confrontational policy toward Beijing. At the same time, there is little sentiment for even a limited appeasement policy, and none at all for a willingness to let China become the hegemon of East Asia. American public opinion seems in accord with elite preferences on this issue. Some 53% of Americans in a February 2014 Gallup poll viewed China unfavorably, while only 43% had a favorable view of that country. An earlier Pew survey found that 53% of respondents considered China's emergence as a great power to be a "major threat" to the United States.

The combination of those various factors suggests that there will be little or no US security retrenchment in East Asia. The outcomes in Europe and the Muslim world are likely to be quite different; Washington's role may well be far more modest and selective in the coming years. That probability places a special responsibility on the European Union, especially its leading members. European nations will need to become more serious about the continent's security affairs, including taking steps to counter Russia in the unlikely event that its territorial ambitions extend beyond Ukraine and other countries directly on its borders. Europe also will need to become more proactive in dealing with both problems and opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa, where it has significant security and economic interests at stake.

Retrenchment does not mean that the United States is sliding into isolationism. America's own extensive global economic interests preclude adopting a course that even faintly resembles that emotional stereotype. But the days of America being the global policeman, much less the global armed social worker, appear to be coming to an end. That change will require adjustments, perhaps even painful adjustments, on the part of the European powers and other nations.

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