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Why Can't America Accept An Imperfect World?

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Since the twilight of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1990s, the United States has meddled militarily—or even waged outright wars—in numerous regions for a multitude of reasons. The roster is a lengthy one: Kuwait, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and, most recently, Ukraine.

Moreover, that list does not include Washington's ongoing “drone wars” in Pakistan and other countries.

Even if U.S. leaders sincerely believed that those military interventions were both strategically desirable and morally justified, the record proves otherwise. Again and again, Washington's actions have destabilized countries and regions, empowered unsavory, extremely dangerous political elements, and created massive refugee crises. Most of those crusades have made already bad situations worse. U.S. leaders must learn that frequently it is wise to accept an imperfect, even unpleasant, situation to avoid creating a catastrophic one.

Unfortunately, most members of the foreign policy establishment show no signs of having internalized appropriate lessons from previous blunders. Acknowledging that Washington's arrogant insistence on expanding NATO to Russia's border trampled on core Russian security interests and helped trigger the tragic war in Ukraine would be a good first step. The logical follow up would be to facilitate negotiations for a peace accord that would guarantee Ukraine's strict neutrality.

Such a settlement would leave Russia in control of both Crimea and the Donbas, and it would confirm that Ukraine will be in Moscow's sphere of influence. Instead of accepting such an unpleasant, but still bearable, outcome, Washington is using Ukraine as a pawn in a NATO proxy war against Russia—a strategy that creates the nightmarish prospect of a bloody, multi-year conflict. Worse, the proxy war could escalate to a direct war between NATO and Russia, with possible nuclear implications.

Such an ill-advised policy typifies U.S. behavior over the past three decades. Instead of allowing the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s to proceed in a natural fashion, despite the accompanying violence, the United States led NATO military interventions to keep the inherently unstable new country of Bosnia intact and (conversely) to sever Serbia's Kosovo province from Belgrade's control. Both areas remain ethnic and political powder kegs a quarter century later

Washington's myopia was even more in evidence with respect to its policy toward Iraq. Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, once a valued U.S. client, committed the unpardonable sin of seizing neighboring Kuwait without U.S. permission. The United States punished him by expelling his forces from Kuwait and inflicting major damage on Iraq's own infrastructure. But U.S. leaders did not stop even when those actions created ripples of destabilization throughout the Muslim world. Instead, under President George W. Bush, the United States initiated a new war and ousted Saddam from power.

Saddam was certainly a nasty, brutal ruler. But he was also a pragmatic, effective secular ruler, who kept the forces of religious extremism at bay. Post-Saddam Iraq has been a mess, punctuated by a Sunni-Shia civil war in 2005-2007 and the subsequent rise of ISIS during Barack Obama's administration. At one point, ISIS controlled nearly a third of Iraq's territory, including the country's second largest city, Mosul. Even today, the Potemkin democratic government in Baghdad retains a precarious grip on power, while Kurds in Northern Iraq exercise de facto independence at the same time as they must fend off repeated Turkish military incursions. With its Iraq policy, Washington undermined stability enforced by a secular tyrant, creating instead a dangerous, much more volatile, environment.

Obama's foreign policy team managed to produce an even more horrible outcome in Libya. In 2011, the United States and several key NATO allies (principally, Britain and France) helped rebel forces overthrow Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton celebrated Qaddafi's downfall (and sadistic execution) with the flippant quip "we came, we saw, he died."

It was extremely difficult to feel any sorrow for Qaddafi's demise; he was a typical corrupt and brutal Third World dictator, seemingly straight out of Hollywood casting. But as in the case of Saddam, Qaddafi was a secular tyrant who managed (barely) to hold a fragile, artificial country together. By helping to eliminate him, the United States plunged Libya into more than a decade of horrific chaos. The result of NATO's meddling has been massive refugee flows, both internally and with desperate attempts to make the perilous Mediterranean crossing to Europe. There have even been reports of open-air slave markets selling black African migrants. Currently, a simmering struggle for power continues between the official government in Tripoli and the forces of rebel Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. No rational person could argue that the U.S.-led military intervention made Libya a better place.

The outcome of U.S. policy in Syria is at least as bad. The Obama administration launched an effort to help Sunni powers (primarily Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey) oust Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad. As bad as Assad was, his domestic opponents were worse. Washington ended up backing some of the most odious Muslim extremist forces in the Middle East, while falsely portraying them as pro-democracy "freedom fighters." As in the cases of Iraq and Libya, U.S. meddling has produced a massive humanitarian tragedy. More than 300,000 Syrians have perished in the fighting and some 6.8 million are refugees—creating a huge refugee flow that has created serious social and political tensions in Europe. By refusing to accept the continued rule of a pro-Iranian secular dictator, Washington has made Syria into yet another chaotic arena and a playground for radical Islamist elements.

Those episodes should induce much greater caution on the part of U.S. policymakers, especially with respect to the conflict in Ukraine. The United States and its NATO allies already caused a needless tragedy because of their clumsy, tone-deaf policy toward Russia and Moscow's

strategic interests in Ukraine. Once again, U.S. leaders refused to accept an unfavorable situation and thereby created a worse one. If they don't back off now, the ultimate result could make the ugly outcomes in the Balkans, Iraq, Libya, and Syria seem like minor missteps.

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