

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Washington's Dangerous Addiction to Military Power

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April 18, 2016

In the latest usage of the US military, CNN recently reported that the White House was set to send another 250 special-operations troops to Syria to aid rebels. There is no indication that anyone in the House or Senate demanded answers of the president as to why he was deploying the troops, how much it would cost, or how long they would stay. There was no protest among the American people against sending U.S. troops to aid one side of a civil war. The major media outlets reported the fact but few, if any, challenged the purpose. In short, this deployment of lethal military force was merely the latest in an apparently never-ending line.

The purpose, cost, and likely outcomes aren't part of the conversation because they don't matter. The act of deploying troops has become an end unto itself.

In this political world of near-unprecedented polarization, applying lethal force to solve international problems has become one of the few areas on Capitol Hill where there is strong bipartisan agreement. In the White House, it appears there are only two camps in the formation of foreign policy: hawks and uber-hawks. For most of the past two administrations there appears to be no credible bloc of advisors counseling against the routine use of lethal military power.

Curiously, even among the otherwise "liberal" and "conservative" television, radio, and print media, there is precious little in the way of challenging the administration or DoD on matters of national defense. Rarely do they pressure senior officials or generals to explain what the deployment is expected to accomplish, nor do they follow-up on those occasions when objectives aren't met to demand they explain why the effort failed.

Because neither elected leaders nor the media question the use of force, it's not surprising the general population isn't demanding accountability. That is unfortunate, as this lack of scrutiny has allowed the president and other appointed leaders a free hand to use force on a routine basis. The consequences for American interests worldwide have been severe. In a presentation at the Cato Institute in Washington last Wednesday, retired Army Colonel Andrew Bacevich provided stinging—and quantifiable—evidence of just how bad the results have been for the US.

Beginning with Desert Storm in 1991 and continuing through the wars and other military actions of today, he described the nonstop employment of the US military for the past few decades and underlined how unsuccessful these operations have been. He said:

Along the way, we tried overwhelming force and shock-and awe. We invaded, occupied, and took a stab at nation building. We experimented with counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, regime change and decapitation, peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention, retaliatory strikes and preventive attack... Today the problems besetting the Greater Middle East are substantially greater than they were when [significant] numbers of U.S. forces first began venturing into the region. ISIS offers but one example of the results. We may argue over the underlying sources of those problems, but there is no arguing that U.S. efforts to alleviate the dysfunction so much in evidence have failed.

With such a stark and extensive list of failures and with the cost to America being so high, it would seem that Congress, the media and the American people would now closely examine any decision to use force with a very critical eye. Yet such is rarely the case. Other than a 2013 exception—when the American people stood against direct action in Syria—new deployments have been met with silent acquiescence. This absence of accountability enables elected and appointed leaders to continue their overreliance on the use of force.

Advocates of sending the military on missions abroad always cite some pressing threat to American national security as justification. As a result, no longer is lethal military power a means of last resort, but an oft-selected policy option of first choice. In a sense, like a drug addict, it appears Washington feels an irresistible necessity to send ground troops, special forces, or use air power somewhere, against someone, at all times. They need the fix.

If neither the Congress, White House, nor the media will fulfill their responsibilities by scrutinizing every request to employ lethal force, the negative consequences will continue to pile up. Our vital national interests will continue to remain at elevated risk, the federal budget will continue to be pressured, and the military instrument itself will continue in its degraded state owing to overuse. It is time to check the wanton deployment of the US military.