



A Decade of No Lessons Learned in U.S. Overseas Intervention

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As this decade began, U.S. armed forces were in year nine of their occupation of Afghanistan. A fresh surge of new U.S. military personnel was sent in by then-President Barack Obama that raised troop levels there to just below 100,000 by August 2010. The estimated expense of the occupation for 2010 was \$94 billion, with a cumulative total through the end of that year of \$338 billion.

Obama had promised he'd start to reverse his troop surge by July 2011, and it seemed just barely possible that the Nobel Peace Prize winner might actually end a U.S. war in the 2010s.

Instead, not counting 2010, this decade has seen its own cumulative cost of our Afghanistan adventure come in at \$690 billion. In 2019, civilian casualties in that tortured nation hit all-time quarterly highs.

The Washington Post this month debuted a series of articles based on piles of documents they obtained via research from the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). Readers of *Reason* should not be surprised to learn there was no more winnable military mission once the Taliban government we wanted to punish for sheltering Al Qaeda had been knocked out, which happened within months of the invasion; that our aid did more to line the pockets of corrupt officials and inefficient contractors than it did to meaningfully rebuild a nation; and that official pronouncements regularly oversold progress toward our goals—whether in military strategy, drug eradication, or nation building. We have been writing about those issues since 2010 and 2012.

Although Donald Trump, before becoming president, had regularly said the war was a "big waste" and that we should "come home" immediately, we now have more troops in Afghanistan than there were when he took office. His first full year running U.S. foreign policy saw a record number of bombs dropped on Afghanistan. (One positive difference is he has been willing to directly negotiate with the Taliban, a likely necessary step that was off the table as the decade began.)

Across the globe in the 2010s, under Obama and under Trump, U.S. foreign policy continued to be wastefully aimed at our unquestionable (and insanely expensive) primacy, our dominance

of arms sales—sometimes on both sides of conflicts—that enable destruction, and our refusal to learn from mistakes.

Overall annual military spending, for example, has seen another 22 percent increase since 2016, from \$611 billion to \$750 billion in 2019. Average annual military spending from 2009 to 2016, inflation-adjusted, tended around 17 percent higher than in 2001–2008.

Also in 2010, U.S. forces were in year seven of the Iraq occupation, but a big pullback was beginning: At the start of the year there were 114,000 troops. By year's end there were less than half that: 48,000.

As the Congressional Research Service reported in May, "In late 2017, the DOD [Department of Defense] stopped reporting the number of U.S. military personnel deployed in support of operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria as part of its quarterly manpower reports and in other official releases. These data remain withheld." However, educated media estimates indicate that as the decade winds down, there are 6,000 troops still left in Iraq, and 12,000-13,000 in Afghanistan.

In addition, U.S. forces or materiel were, both as the decade began and as it ends, occupying around 800 bases in 70 countries in pursuit of a foreign policy goal of U.S. primacy, a goal from which our foreign policy establishment has not shifted despite the glaring failures and grim aftereffects of our Middle East interventions, and despite all the allegations that President Donald Trump, commander in chief for the decade's last third, had a less interventionist foreign policy vision.

Despite Obama's drawdowns in the Middle East, he still had nearly 200,000 active duty U.S. military personnel stationed overseas as his administration ended. The Trump administration's most recent figure, minus the secret Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan figures, is 174,000. Adding back in best estimates for those hotspots, America's numerical overseas commitments are pretty much equal from decade end to beginning.

Similarly, and despite Trump's grumbling about cheapskate allies from NATO and elsewhere not holding up their end of our "manage the planet" bargain, our military alliance structure has remained intact as the decade went on, from Asia (where our mutual defense pacts are still in full force and our troop levels remain high) to NATO (where troop deployments and exercises continue to increase, and the U.S. is planning new bases) to Latin America (where Trump's administration toyed with invasion to get our way in Venezuelan domestic politics).

The decade also saw some fresh disasters when it came to our interventionist instincts. In 2011, Obama led a campaign in Libya that killed its dictator while leaving chaos, terror, and instability in its wake. Our absurd dedication to our "alliance" with Saudi Arabia made us complicit in its ongoing—and massively destructive—attacks in Yemen. That effort, begun under Obama, has killed or displaced hundreds of thousands of people while leaving millions at risk of starvation. Trump, despite his grumbings about pointless overseas alliances and interventions, is so dedicated to continuing it that he vetoed an attempt to get him to stop, with

nothing whatsoever in terms of U.S. interests for this supposed "America First" president except pleasing the butchers who run our "ally" Saudi Arabia.

Syria also became a new site of active U.S. military efforts this decade, beginning with Obama in 2013 and continuing under Trump, despite some confusing shuffling earlier this year that allowed our NATO ally Turkey to pound and displace their Kurdish foes (and our former allies) but left most our troops still elsewhere in the country or the Middle East as a possible tripwire for future conflict.

Trump's general approach to the Middle East—far from the "America First" reluctance for intervention some of his fans continue to believe in—is summed up well in John Glaser, Christopher A. Prebel, and A. Trevor Thrall's book *Fuel to the Fire*:

He has maintained an extensive infrastructure of forward-deployed U.S. military assets throughout the region. In his first year as president, he increased the number of U.S. troops in the theater by more than 30 percent; almost 60,000 were deployed there as of December 2018. Overall, the use of force in the region increased massively as Trump loosened the rules of engagement and intensified ongoing bombing campaigns across multiple countries. In 2017, the number of coalition airstrikes against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria rose by nearly 50 percent compared with the previous year, while civilian deaths rose by an estimated 215 percent. The use of drone strikes has also increased markedly

Trump's occasional willingness to buck foreign policy convention has been mostly bad. He backed out of both the Iran nuclear deal and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, both moves that make the world more, not less, bellicose and at risk of destructive wars. (Trump does, though, deserve credit for not letting the June Iranian shoot down of a U.S. drone escalate further.)

Military pundits complain about certain overarching changes that have sped up this decade, such as a shift in control over foreign policy from the State Department to the Pentagon (and the CIA). Some complain that no matter which agency is ostensibly in charge, our continued focus on giant ships, fancy planes, and masses of bodies ignores that the future of military conflict is (and should be) all about special forces able to move quickly, and a world where drug lords and billionaires will wage war as much as nations do.

But whether it was Obama or Trump in charge, the 2010s have been a decade of spending money we don't have and wasting lives pursuing goals we can't win. More business as usual for the U.S. foreign policy machine, across administrations and decades.