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Obama's Whac-A-Mole strategy

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It has become conventional wisdom to note that President Obama has failed in his efforts to extricate the United States from military conflicts in the Middle East. Having promised to end these wars, he has in the past year expanded U.S. interventions in Iraq, Syria and other countries. The troop drawdown in Afghanistan has slowed to a trickle. “Obama’s legacy,” says Gene Healy of the Cato Institute, is clear: “endless war.” The New York Times’ Mark Landler noted in May that Obama had just “passed a somber, little-noticed milestone: He has now been at war longer than Mr. Bush, or any other American president.”

But these characterizations treat all military activity as alike, in a way that blurs rather than sharpens the picture. When Obama entered the White House, about 180,000 U.S. troops were engaged in active military combat in two theaters, Iraq and Afghanistan. The goal of both wars was to establish political order in these countries — to create functioning liberal democracies.

U.S. military policy under Obama has been different, narrower in its scope and more modest in its goals. The United States is actively engaged in efforts to defeat terrorist groups, deny them territory and work with local allies to keep militants on the run. But these policies mostly involve small numbers of Special Operations forces and trainers, air power and drones.

It would be fair to conclude that Obama has come to his policy of intervention-lite through trial and error. In his first term, he remarked that “the tide of war is receding,” and he undoubtedly hoped to have fewer active military missions in the last year of his presidency. But political chaos in the Middle East and the rise of the Islamic State have forced him to settle on a strategy for the region: attacking terrorist groups without expanding the mission into nation-building.

Parts of the world are always going to be in turmoil, and some of those will export their instability in various ways, terrorism and refugees being the most obvious today. When a global superpower has been able to limit the chaos, it has often proved useful. Britain played that role in the 19th century, when, as historian Max Boot pointed out to me, “there was a British military intervention somewhere in the world every year of Queen Victoria’s reign.” The United States has had its own tradition of limited interventions. “Between 1800 and 1934,” Boot has written, “the U.S. Marines staged 180 landings abroad.”

But history is replete with examples of ill-chosen interventions in support of nasty regimes, with unintended consequences and creeping escalations that have produced greater instability and weakened the superpower, lessening its ability to act in central parts of the global system. Today,

for example, were the United States bogged down in another major war in the Middle East, it would have less capacity to help its Asian allies deter Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea — which could threaten peace in the world's most dynamic economic region.

So the challenge is to pick these interventions carefully, find decent allies and make sure that U.S. efforts are carefully defined and constrained, doing enough to help local actors but being wary of the constant pressure for escalation. Above all they require keeping in mind that these are ongoing challenges not easily “solved.” The result is bound to disappoint both ardent interventionists and anti-interventionists, but it reflects the realities of being the world's leading power.

An important corollary is to recognize that these are not wars for national survival, and so they cannot be fought with the rhetoric and morality of such existential struggles. We cannot torture and imprison by using analogies to World War II. This is not such a war.

Can this strategy work? It has been characterized as a “Whac-A-Mole” approach that simply keeps beating up the bad guys without ever solving the problem. This is true, but actually solving the problem involves creating an effective and inclusive political system in places such as Syria, seen by all elements within the society as legitimate — an almost impossible task for a foreign country. Better to focus U.S. energies on defeating the most dangerous groups, which would then give local regimes a chance to take control of their countries.

These are ongoing military actions, not unending wars, and ones that the United States can easily afford. They also work. A Whac-A-Mole strategy is no fun for the mole. Just ask the Islamic State as it watches its territory shrink, its caliphate collapse and its finances dry up. These policies might not solve all of the problems in the Middle East. New groups and problems will arise. But the United States should be ready and willing to take a whack at those as well.