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The Democrats' New National Security Strategy

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This week the New Democrat Coalition, a 52-member group of centrist Democrats from the House of Representatives, unveiled its principles for national security strategy. Like the similar effort from House Speaker Paul Ryan three weeks ago, this working document is a political maneuver and carries no legal or policymaking weight. Thirteen of the members of the coalition sit on the House Armed Services Committee, however, and thus it tells us something about the fault lines in future national security debates in Congress and about Hillary Clinton's allies should she win the White House, as seems increasingly likely.

A close reading of the two-page document, unfortunately, suggests that the Democrats have learned only partial lessons from the long slog against terrorism in the Middle East. The strategy memo strongly suggests that Democrats are ready to double down on the Obama administration's approach to national security and foreign policy. Given the general agreement among observers that Hillary Clinton is more hawkish than President Obama, we have good reason to doubt that House Democrats will present any resistance to an extended run of the failed foreign policies in place today.

On paper, the New Democrats appear to have figured out that "not every problem can be solved with a bomb or a tank," calling for a strategy to "eliminate terrorist threats without reckless interventions." In light of President Obama's own admission that the Libyan intervention was the worst mistake of his presidency, this seems like the least one should have learned from the past fifteen years of American intervention in the Middle East. By almost every measure - financial, lives lost, terrorist attacks - the United States is worse off for having intervened so heavily in Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention the persistent drone attacks in Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, and Wherever. Any sign that Democrats are rethinking the "shoot first, plan later" approach to foreign policy is very welcome.

The rest of the memo, however, combines vague platitudes with a series of bullet points outlining an unrepentant vision of American foreign policy overextension. The strategy's heavy emphasis on counterterrorism makes it clear that the New Democrats are unwilling to challenge the overheated rhetoric about the terrorist threat. In addition to calling on the United States to "defeat organizations like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda," the New Democrats also call for aggressive development assistance to "prevent chaos and instability upon which terrorist organizations prey." Even if the New Democrats have decided that the military interventions themselves were mistakes, after fifteen years of trying (and failing) to help Afghanistan get its feet and almost as long in Iraq, Congress should have learned that democracy, civil society, and a

robust economy are not things the United States can deliver. Efforts to do so, with or without military intervention, are doomed to failure.

Just as troubling are the calls for more aggressive efforts to confront terrorism on the home front. Acts of domestic terrorism, like in San Bernardino and Orlando, are tragic, but the worst thing the United States can do in their wake is rush to implement “solutions” that do more harm than good. The New Democrats want to “deny domestic terrorists the weapons and resources they use to perpetrate atrocities” and to increase funding for federal, state, and local homeland security and law enforcement counterterrorism programs. History with homeland security since 9/11 tells us, however, that expanding such efforts will lead to more wasted money and greater restrictions on civil liberties without any increase in actual security.

Further, the New Democrats call for increased engagement to confront a wide range of conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, none of which directly threaten American national security. The strategy calls for a recommitment to NATO “in the face of Russian aggression,” to “strengthen our relationships with Israel, Egypt, and our Middle East partners” in order to “take a more active role in leading diplomatic efforts to form new alliances in the region,” and to “expand engagement in the Asia-Pacific” to “preserve U.S. influence...” And in case they missed anyone, the final bullet point calls for the United States to “Stand by commitments to U.S. alliances, increased engagement with countries and people whenever possible, and continue to share the burden of security arrangements.” Such a stance is a full-proof recipe for entanglement and intervention.

If all this sounds familiar it should. The New Democrats are simply echoing the bipartisan foreign policy consensus of the past two administrations. The United States, in this view, must engage deeply both militarily and diplomatically in order to keep the world from falling into chaos. In truth, however, the real lesson of the past fifteen years is just the opposite: American intervention and meddling have fueled chaos and instability in the Middle East and elsewhere, meanwhile feeding the threat of terrorism against Americans. The United States would be better off pulling back from many of its current commitments and adopting a greater degree of humility about what American power can truly achieve.

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