

Taking Bush's Preventive War Doctrine Underground (Sort Of)

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Remember when Democrats and independents craved a less belligerent U.S. foreign policy that eschewed the aggressive preventive war doctrine of the George W. Bush administration? When Barack Obama took office, the atmospherics did seem to change as the new president promised to withdraw forces from Iraq and actually talk to unfriendly nations, such as Iran and North Korea. The only problem is that the new boss is largely the same as the old boss in the war on terror.

To give some credit where it is due, the recently released Obama National Security Strategy has laudably narrowed the broad war to attacking al-Qaeda and associated groups around the world. But Obama has also made that war more aggressive and more secretive (sort of).

The war against al-Qaeda-related Islamic extremism is still too broad and makes the United States new and dangerous enemies. Since 9/11, al-Qaeda has morphed into a much more decentralized organization—with Osama bin Laden and its central trunk relegated to inspiring local franchise groups in Iraq, the Arabian peninsula, East Asia, and North and East Africa. These groups like the prestige of the al-Qaeda name but focus mainly on local grievances. Just as he must have been pleased with Bush's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq generating more Islamist radicalism, bin Laden would like to bait the United States into attacking its affiliate local groups around the world for the same reason. Foolishly, Obama is obliging him.

Obama is escalating the CIA's "covert" drone attacks against al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, and other co-traveling groups in Pakistan and increasing the use of secretive U.S. Special Forces around the world. The Special Forces have been expanded—in troop levels, budget, and countries deployed from 60 to 75 in the last year and a half—and they are doing more unilateral preventive and retaliatory attacks against al-Qaeda-related groups and training of and joint operations with local counterterrorism forces. As well as retaining the rhetoric of the cult of the offensive against terror groups—as George W. Bush put it, "offense is the best defense"—the Obama administration is approving even more aggressive "covert" preventive military actions than the Bush administration did, according to high level U.S. military officials.

In particular, aggressive U.S. operations in Somalia, Pakistan, and Yemen have been stepped up. Of course, the al-Shabaab Islamists in Somalia, the Pakistani Taliban, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula either hadn't really been that popular in those areas or didn't focus their attacks on American targets until the U.S. began escalating operations against them. Now the al-Shabaab is more popular than ever, the Pakistani Taliban has dispatched a bomber to New York's Time Square, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has sent the Christmas BVD bomber the United States' way.

And the Special Forces don't think they are making the United States new enemies in enough places! One such official lamented to the *Washington Post*, "Eighty percent of our investment is now in resolving current conflicts, not in building capabilities with partners to avoid future ones." Yet as Osama bin Laden has made clear time after time before and after 9/11, his main motive for attacking the United States is its "infidel" intervention in and occupation of Muslim lands. So the not-so-secret Special Forces presence in 75 countries is hardly helping to avoid conflicts, but is instead stirring the hornets' nest of local groups and making them begin attacking the United States.

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Lastly, as during the Cold War, the adversary often knows more about such "secret" operations than does the American public. Covert action has just been one more way of neutering the important constitutional requirement that the (entire) Congress must approve of military action. Although the Obama administration has laudably avoided the Bush administration's breathtakingly ostentatious unconstitutional claims of executive power in wartime, it has nonetheless wildly stretched the congressional war authorization in 2001 to use "all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons" that the president concludes "planned, authorized, committed, or aided" the 9/11 attacks. Many of al-Qaeda's local affiliates around the world had nothing to do with those attacks. Thus, Obama is still acting unconstitutionally without Congress' authorization of the use of force.

Obama—for constitutional reasons and to keep U.S. citizens safe around the world and at home—should further narrow the focus of U.S. actions to only those entities mentioned in the congressional post-9/11 war resolution.

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