

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

America the Humble

The End of Post-9/11 Militarism

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At the United Nations last week, President Joe Biden contended that the United States now stands at “an inflection point in history” during which “relentless war” is being replaced by “relentless diplomacy.” He also pointed out that “many of our greatest concerns cannot be solved or even addressed through the force of arms.” This could mark a notable departure from the last 20 years, when military ventures largely defined U.S. foreign policy.

Impelled by an overwhelming desire to hunt down those responsible for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States launched military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, where it toppled regimes that had little or nothing to do with 9/11. Initially successful at that task and eventually accompanied by rhetoric about spreading democracy and stability in the Middle East, the wars soon devolved into extended counterinsurgency (or counteroccupation) operations that have resulted in the deaths of more than 100 times as many people as perished on 9/11.

But it hasn't always been this way. The militarization of the post-9/11 period has been a glaring, extended, and highly consequential aberration. During the quarter century before that, the United States pursued a foreign policy that was far more humble militarily, and it seems ready to resume that tradition after its exhausting and costly 9/11-induced military ventures, which have so thoroughly failed to deliver satisfactory results at an acceptable cost. And the country may now have a president fully committed to carrying out such a policy.

Humble Pie

In the wake of its withdrawal from the Vietnam War in 1973, the United States fell into something that has been dubbed the “Vietnam syndrome.” Although it still pursued the Cold War with the Soviet Union, it substantially avoided the active use of U.S. military force to do so. In the late 1970s, in fact, the United States essentially let its policy of containing the Soviet Union lapse and watched as the Soviets welcomed 10 new countries into their camp: Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Grenada, Laos, Mozambique, Nicaragua, South Yemen, and Vietnam. All of those countries soon became dependent on Moscow economically, politically, and sometimes militarily—particularly Afghanistan, where the Soviets found it necessary to

intervene with force in order to keep their allies in power. As it turned out, the Soviets eventually came to realize that they might have been better off being contained.

American military force was applied rather sparingly during the entire last quarter of the twentieth century. The most assertive Cold War actions by the United States during that period were the military invasion of the small Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983 and the operation to support anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan. The United States also bombed Libya for a day in 1986 in retaliation for the Libyan government's sponsorship of terrorist activities; invaded Panama in 1989 to depose an offending regime; and led an international coalition in 1991 to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In all cases, the opponents were scarcely formidable. Although the Iraqi army may have looked impressive on paper, it lacked strategy, tactics, defenses, leadership, and morale, and it responded to confrontation with the U.S. military mostly by fleeing or by surrendering.

Other military ventures Washington pursued between the Vietnam War and 9/11 were even more limited and were carried out mostly for humanitarian purposes. American troops were sent to Lebanon in 1983 to help police a cease-fire there, but they were abruptly pulled out when 241 of them were killed in their barracks by a terrorist bomb. In 1992, American soldiers helped stabilize Somalia, which was in the midst of a civil war and an attendant famine. But Washington withdrew its forces after 18 soldiers were killed in a chaotic firefight. Stung by this experience, the Clinton administration did not act to stop the genocide in nearby Rwanda in 1994.

There were great concerns about civil war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, but along with much handwringing, the U.S. military role involved little more than supplying aid and advice and, toward the end of the conflict, conducting limited bombing missions against Serbian targets in Bosnia. Only after the fighting was over did Washington send in troops to perform policing operations. A few years later, the United States led a NATO bombing campaign against Serbia to stop violence against Kosovo Albanians, but no American forces ever got close to fighting on the ground. Overall, this does not suggest a country looking for a fight, questing after monsters to destroy, or seeking to act like a hegemon.

It is true, however, that American rhetoric during this period did not match its military humility. President Ronald Reagan insisted that world peace was at stake in the civil war in Lebanon, and President George H. W. Bush opined that his war in the Gulf would "chart the future of the world for the next 100 years." In addition, Bush (and later President Bill Clinton) declared that a coup in Haiti was an extraordinary threat to the security and economy of the United States. There have also been proclamations about how the United States is "the one indispensable nation," suggesting that others are, well, dispensable.

Despite all the hyperbolic and self-important rhetoric, the fact remains that between the end of the Vietnam War and the turn of the century, the United States averaged only about 20 combat deaths per year including the toll from the attack in Lebanon (or about half that annual average if those deaths are excluded). Over the same period, the total number of military personnel dropped by 720,000, and military spending declined from 5.6 percent of U.S. GDP to 3.1 percent.

In the presidential election campaign of 2000, no one seems to have opposed George W. Bush's explicit support for a "humble" foreign policy. Indeed, his Democratic opponent, Vice President Al Gore, deemed the idea to be "an important one." To a considerable degree, both candidates were in tune with the times.

The Aberration

Any commitment to humility disappeared when al Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. After the attacks, Bush abruptly abandoned humility to proclaim that the country's "responsibility to history" was now to "rid the world of evil." With this extravagant goal in mind, the United States launched wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and began to hunt down terrorist suspects across the globe. The U.S. reaction to the 9/11 attacks accounts for the overwhelming amount of American military action over the last 50 years. Without 9/11, the comparative military humility of the last quarter of the twentieth century would likely have continued.

Neither of the two post-9/11 wars was necessary. Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq with its ramshackle army was fully containable and deterrable, and it was unlikely that the insecure Taliban regime in Afghanistan, where al Qaeda had carried out training, needed to be overthrown. The relationship between the Taliban and al Qaeda was often very uncomfortable, and the regime might have been susceptible to international pressure—especially from Saudi Arabia, which had been trying to extradite terror chief Osama bin Laden for years.

The 9/11 attack did not prove to be a harbinger—no terrorist attack before or after, in a war zone or out of one, has inflicted even one-tenth as much total destruction. And al Qaeda central, while inspiring some wannabes abroad and creating many videos, has done almost nothing of consequence in 20 years. Even under siege, it is difficult to see why it could not have infiltrated a few operatives into the United States legally or illegally or carried out local attacks like the shooting rampage in Mumbai in 2008.

That was not how it looked at first, of course, and some degree of alarm was justified for a while. That alarm, however, should in time have been reassessed; with little exception, it was not. The same holds for the establishment of a massive apparatus to deal with terrorism within the United States that has cost well over \$2 trillion. For this to be justified, it would have had to deter, disrupt, or protect against about three 9/11 attacks every four years.

In conducting the Iraq war, U.S. leaders seemed to have believed that other actors would not react. But Iran had a huge incentive to make the American occupation of neighboring Iraq as miserable as possible, and terrorists from around the world were attracted to the fray, something warned about before the U.S. invasions. In Afghanistan, the notion was that American soldiers "could walk into the world's most conservative villages, make friends, hunt their enemies, and build a better society," as Graeme Smith wrote in his book, *The Dogs Are Eating Them Now: Our War in Afghanistan*. Instead, attacks by the foreigners regularly rallied tribal members to the Taliban's cause.

Course Correction

As it became clear just how costly and counterproductive the main conflicts of the “war on terror” had become, Washington began to shift back to a humbler military approach. In a major statement in January 2012, the Defense Department stressed that “U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct largescale, prolonged stability operations.” This suggests that the military and its leaders had concluded that they simply didn’t know how to successfully execute such missions, and, in that sense, it expressed a degree of humility. Presumably with this in mind, at least in part, policymakers worked to reconfigure the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq to reduce the death rate of U.S. military forces. In Afghanistan, the rate was over 400 per year in 2010–11, but it declined to under 25 per year later. The death rate in Iraq was over 800 per year between 2004 and 2007, but it declined to under 70 per year in 2010–11 and to less than 25 per year thereafter. (All of these rates, however, are much lower than those suffered earlier in the wars in Korea and Vietnam.) In 2014, Washington sent troops back to Iraq to fight the Islamic State, or ISIS, but in the years that followed, the United States mostly provided air support while local fighters bore the brunt of combat deaths; about 20 U.S. service members were killed in the conflict.

Both the Obama and Trump administrations moved to reduce U.S. commitments to the “forever wars,” echoing a shift in American public opinion. Indicative of the public’s wariness about military ventures abroad was its response to bipartisan support in Congress in 2013 for the punitive bombing of Syria after the ruling regime of Bashar al-Assad was deemed to have carried out a poison gas attack on civilians. Out of concern that the action would lead to further involvement in the conflict, the public was strongly opposed to using force—as members of Congress of both parties found when they went home to their districts.

Evidence of this emerging American aversion to the 9/11 wars could be found as early as 2005, as I noted then. Now, the United States seems to have fully embraced an “Iraq syndrome” or an “Iraq/Afghanistan syndrome,” and it has moved back to a considerable degree of humility. As something of an indicator, military spending as a percentage of GDP, which rose considerably in the decade after 9/11, is back to the levels of 2000. The American public might still support a mostly airborne campaign against international terrorism, but there is little appetite for invasion and occupation.

Something like humility can perhaps be seen today even in the reaction to the rise of China, which many see as the primary danger out there. Even alarmists push for little more than rearranging the U.S. military (or selling submarines to allies) in a (potentially quixotic) effort to somehow “balance” against China’s (primarily economic) rise. Other proposals have even less bite. For example, they advocate working with allies, improving American officials’ understanding of China, calling out China’s repressive policies, countering Beijing’s efforts to potentially control communication networks, and cooperating on common interests, such as climate change. But you do not hear calls for major military operations to counter China.

After the extended aberration caused by the overreaction to 9/11, American military humility appears to be back. And as the country limps from its 9/11-induced failure in Afghanistan, it even seems possible that official rhetoric will mellow, as suggested by Biden’s recent UN speech. Self-infatuated proclamations about American superpowerdom, exceptionalism, and indispensable nationhood, seen by many to be arrogant, may subside, at least for now.

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