

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Mr. Obama, Make 2013 a Year of Change

By: Doug Bandow - December 31, 2012

Peace on earth and goodwill to all men, runs the Christmas wish, but for more than a decade America has been at war. The Obama administration's most important challenge the coming year is to restore peace as the nation's natural condition. It won't be easy.

The first challenge facing the president, backed by presumed secretary of state John Kerry and possible secretary of defense Chuck Hagel, will be concluding America's longest war: Afghanistan. Begun with an attack on the U.S. homeland, Afghanistan joins World War II as the best-justified of America's many conflicts.

But that was more than 11 years ago, when Washington's objective was to destroy al-Qaeda and drive the terrorist group's protector, the Afghan Taliban regime, from power. Those objectives were completed almost immediately. Since then, U.S. and allied forces have been engaged in the Quixotic quest of bringing liberal democracy to Central Asia. It's as if the Roosevelt administration had defeated Imperial Japan a few months after Pearl Harbor and then switched to a nation-building project in China that continued into the 1950s.

The Obama administration is committed to withdrawing most combat troops by 2014, but that raises the question: which soldier or Marine will be the last American to die for a mistake? Another year or two years of support isn't going to make the Karzai government markedly more democratic, honest or competent. A little more time isn't likely to turn the Afghan National Army into an effective defender of a unified Afghanistan. The U.S. withdrawal should be fast and complete. Putative secretaries Kerry and Hagel served in Vietnam; will they stand by as today's young men continue to die needlessly in Afghanistan?

Alongside the challenge of getting out of Afghanistan will be staying out of Syria. Bashar al-Assad appears to be nearing the end of his presidency. The Syrian regime retains substantial military forces, but continues to lose ground. Increasingly forced to fight for Damascus, Assad's criminal clan is ever less likely to regain control of territory previously lost.

The final collapse will be messy and the aftermath will be bloody. And no one knows what will emerge. One basic principle should guide U.S. policy: the one thing worse than regional instability is American involvement in a regional war. Israel and Turkey have obvious geographic and security interests; France has historic ties. Let them all play a

role in the reconstruction of Syria if they desire. Keep American forces home. Administration officials may be tempted by the Sirens' call of America as the "indispensable nation," but Washington's objective should be peace, not global social engineering.

Only slightly less dangerous is the prospect of going to war with Iran. With U.S. intelligence agencies not even convinced that Iran has an active weapons program underway—that regime's objective may be capability rather than possession—Washington has time to develop a more positive negotiating strategy backed by most other nations. Paradoxically, the West's unrelenting threats against Tehran may convince the Iranian leadership of the need for nuclear weapons for self-defense.

The so-called pivot to Asia requires a rethink. Although the U.S. government engaged in welfare reform back in the 1990s, American foreign and military policy continues to breed international dependence. Washington's Asian allies range from the well-heeled, such as Japan and South Korea, to the barely functioning, such as the Philippines. All prefer America to do the heavy lifting on defense. Instead, the United States should remind its friends of the Biblical principle: God helps those who help themselves.

The situation is getting ever more dangerous as Tokyo and Manila lobby the United States to guarantee their contested territorial claims against China, and Seoul expects continued protection as North Korea proceeds with its missile and nuclear programs. The administration approach—enhancing regional military ties while claiming that nothing has anything to do in any way with China—is foolish on several levels.

The first is to encourage the continuing dependency of nations well able to deter Chinese adventurism. Some American analysts fuss that without increased U.S. involvement Asian nations will spend more on the military. So? America's objective should be to *stay out of other conflicts*, not to insist on getting involved. Countries with interests to protect should spend money on weapons. The security of Asian nations is of much greater interest to Asian nations than to the United States.

Of course, it is commonly assumed that Washington's security guarantees will prevent war from breaking out. However, history is littered with alliances, commitments, deployments and treaties that acted as transmission belts of war rather than firebreaks to war. Both World War I and World War II spread because great powers promised to go to war for smaller powers.

Moreover, great-power guarantees encourage smaller powers to act irresponsibly. Who doubts, for instance, that the Philippines will act differently if it believes the U.S. navy will automatically steam to its rescue should shooting break out around Scarborough Reef? Both Taiwan's Chen Shui-bian and Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili acted recklessly when they had presumed American support.

Finally, Beijing is not likely to react as Washington expects. Americans imagine that the rest of the world will genuflect when their power and determination are fully displayed. However, that is likely to convince China's leaders of the need for additional forces, greater military spending and firmer support for allies such as North Korea. The People's Republic of China would be no more likely to give in than would the United States of America under similar circumstances.

Antiterrorism policy also warrants a new approach. The United States has largely won: Osama bin-Laden is dead, al-Qaeda is a wreck, and national spin-offs of the terrorist organization—in Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen, for instance—are mostly interested in targeting their host nations. Indeed, Washington has been too successful in a sense. The United States promiscuously uses drones in other nations, and increasingly targets individuals and groups not primarily threatening America. This policy risks creating new enemies of the United States, illustrated by the would-be Times Square bomber, a Pakistani-American outraged by what he saw as the callous murder of Pakistani civilians.

Having done a good job of killing and capturing those meaning America ill, the U.S. government now should do a better job of not creating new terrorists. The administration should concentrate on the most serious and direct threats, reduce high-profile but unnecessary intervention abroad, refuse to automatically turn the enemies of allied governments into the enemies of America, and reduce the use of drones. Terrorism has defined U.S. foreign policy for a decade. That needs to change.

The foregoing is a full agenda. Which is all the more reason to leave friendly states with primary responsibility for their own and their regions' security. The Balkans remain a mess. Georgia is going through a tense power transition. Ukraine remains a battleground for oligarchs. North Africa remains unstable. All are good opportunities for the Europeans to try to develop a common diplomatic and military approach. If that fails, no worries: there's no need for Washington to step in.

Illness and age seem likely to soon force transitions in Venezuela and Cuba. Both countries are near the United States, but neither is capable of significant mischief. Washington could achieve significant positive impact by leaving its Latin American neighbors free to rethink the drug war. The latter is a violent failure which is losing support even in America.

Africa mixes tragedy and hope. From Zimbabwe to Nigeria and Congo to Sudan much is happening, but little is within Washington's control and none warrants use of military force. The United States should relearn the value of restraint. It shouldn't attempt to micromanage the insoluble.

All this is what the administration should do. That doesn't mean it will do so. Thus, a year from now most of the same problems will recur. We will be older but not much wiser. And America's permanent, collective amnesia will be evident as, yet again, we relive the past.