



## Costs and Benefits of 2013's Foreign Policy Initiatives

By CHRISTOPHER PREBLE - January 3, 2013

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The last-minute budget deal approved by the departing 112th Congress delayed, but did not avert, military spending cuts. The major foreign policy initiatives in the new year and beyond will be constrained largely by a means-ends gap that is already quite wide, and that will grow wider. If the Pentagon has fewer dollars to spend, or simply fewer than they expected to have, the military should have fewer missions. Responsible policymakers should carefully weigh the costs and benefits of foreign policy initiatives, particularly those that are likely to impose an onerous burden on our troops.

Let's consider how this austerity imperative will play out in the months ahead.

**Afghanistan:** America's longest war is one of the most costly and burdensome missions on the military's plate, and President Obama should bring it to a close. The war has ground to an inconclusive, unsatisfying conclusion. Nation-building missions usually fail, and Afghanistan proved a particularly unsuitable place for testing new nation-building doctrines. Our ally, the Hamid Karzai-led government that Americans have supported to the tune of many tens of billions of dollars--nearly \$100 billion, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction--is corrupt and ineffectual. To make matters worse, the mercurial Karzai could demand a one-sided status-of-forces agreement that would subject the U.S. troops who remain in his country beyond 2014 to the whims of the Afghan justice system, although he suggested last month that he was willing to allow U.S. troops to be covered by U.S. laws. Obama should demand full legal protections for a small residual force, fewer than 10,000 troops total, focused solely on counterterrorism. If Karzai refuses, Obama should opt for a full withdrawal, and choose to hunt down and destroy what remains of al Qaeda from more hospitable locations. We could know more about the future of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan following Karzai's visit to the White House next week.

**Syria:** Notwithstanding a new United Nations report showing that up to 60,000 people have been killed in the brutal civil war in Syria, there is no groundswell of public opinion demanding U.S. military intervention there, and therefore no political imperative for the president to act. And that is a good thing, because there is no compelling U.S. national security interest at stake in Syria, no clearly defined and achievable military objective, and no reasonable exit strategy. In other words, military intervention in Syria violates all of the essential preconditions of the Weinberger-Powell doctrine. Well-intended policymakers might occasionally send a military flush with money and other resources on quixotic missions in pursuit of amorphous humanitarian imperatives. But to do so at a time when the troops are strained and the money is tight, and likely to get tighter, borders on negligence.

**Iran:** George W. Bush surveyed the case for overt war with Iran, and opted instead for a covert one. In his first term, Barack Obama carried forward with the Bush approach. Cyberattacks (and other apparent sabotage) have set back Iran's uranium enrichment program, and increasingly punitive economic sanctions have raised the costs of Iranian noncompliance with international demands to come clean. But this pressure seems mainly to have convinced the Iranians of the need for a stronger deterrent. The advocates of the Iraq war convinced the American people that a war to rid Saddam Hussein of his (imaginary) nuclear weapons would be quick, cheap, and easy, and that future wars would be too. The American people won't be fooled so easily again, and neither should the president. The Iranian nuclear program is real, but an Iranian nuclear weapon isn't imminent. Given that a campaign to completely destroy the Iranians' nuclear ambitions couldn't be completed from the air, the costs of preventive war still far exceed the benefits.

**The Asia "Rebalance":** The buzzword of 2012--revised from "pivot" which upsets the Europeans--will likely persist into 2013. But the details of the rebalance to Asia remain murky. Expect a lot of senior-level affirmations of the U.S. commitment to allies in the region, and perhaps a bit about additional naval deployments and joint exercises. Basing rights for ships and planes might need to be negotiated or renegotiated. But there is unlikely to be a large increase in the number of U.S. ground troops there. The overarching focus should be on actually building partner capacity, not simply talking about it. If countries in the region are as concerned about China's rising power as the Obama administration's rebalancing rhetoric suggests, we should expect those countries to be willing to contribute more to their own defense. Actually, we should demand it. That ultimately could allow the United States to spend less, not more, in a vital region.