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From Cold War to Hot Peace: The Habit of American Force

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WHEN THE UNITED STATES BECAME MORE SECURE, it became more forceful. Since the Cold War ended, it has spent far more than any other country or coalition to build armed forces; it has sent forces into combat more frequently than it did in the era of much bigger threats to national security; and it has done so much more often than any other country. The United States has been, quite simply, "the most militarily active state in the world."[1] To many in the mainstream of American politics, this is as it should be, because the United States has the right and responsibility to lead the world—or push it—in the right direction. To others, more alarmed by the pattern, U.S. behavior has evolved into "permanent war."[2]

Some of this belligerence was imposed on the United States by al Qaeda on September 11, 2001, but the terrorist threat cannot account for the bulk of blood and treasure expended in the use of force over the past two decades. In the first half of the post-Cold War era, until complications in Iraq and Afghanistan, American national security policy was driven not by threats but by opportunities—or rather what an overambitious consensus in the foreign policy elite mistakenly saw as opportunities. Instead of countering immediate dangers, American policy aimed to stabilize the

[1] Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 8. See also Stephen Peter Rosen, "Blood Brothers: The Dual Origins of American Bellicosity," *The American Interest* 4 (July/August 2009).
[2] Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

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world in order to prevent dangers from arising. There is no evidence, however, that this activism short-circuited more dangers than it generated. And at the same time, American force has been ambivalent, trying to do too much with too little. Policy elites who wanted to make the world right sometimes held back for fear that costly ventures would lack public support. Sometimes they have chosen the worst of both worlds, compromising between all-out effort and doing nothing at all, but with the result of action that is both costly and indecisive.

The use of force is the most extreme instrument of foreign policy, and it is what preoccupies the planners of national security policy. Americans like to believe that the United States does not resort to force lightly, and that when it does, it does so only defensively. Whatever the motives, or however justified force may be in principle, it is hard to control and exploit effectively in practice. Many who want to use American force for good purposes focus too much on motives, too much on the ends rather than the means. They lack sufficient awareness of how limitations of the means complicate and often derail the ends.

The news is not all bad. Some of the American uses of force in recent years were necessary, proper, and effective, and some of the mistakes are clear only in the luxury of critics' hindsight. The record of judgment and action is inconsistent and not thoroughly explained by any simple theory. The negative part of the record, however, was mostly due to a bad combination of material power, moral conceit, and middling effort. American leaders—both Democrats and Republicans—tried to do a lot, with excessive confidence in their ability to understand and control developments, but they wanted to do it all on the cheap. All too often they wound up surprised when the price turned out to be expensive. They liked to use force frequently but not intensely, when the reverse combination would have been wiser. Too often they found that force proves ineffective if applied sparingly. How did this combination of forcefulness and hesitancy happen?

When the end of the Cold War swept away the epochal threat to Western democracy, the United States had a choice: to relax or to advance. A naïve realist would have expected the first, a comfortable retirement from military exertion. The disappearance of military threat with the collapse of the only other superpower, and of political threat with the worldwide collapse of the only competitive ideology, provided unprecedented national security—at least in the strict sense of the term. (National security is distinguished from "human" security, the wider span of concerns—for example, environmental health—that may well be more important in the end.) The single significant exception to this benign situation in international politics was the potential

for interruption of oil supplies, but exporters would have no incentive to exploit that option except in retaliation for American meddling in their interests. Otherwise, the threats left on the post-Cold War roster were indirect rather than immediate, local not global, threats not to vital material interests of the United States but to moral interests, or the interests of other countries' citizens. Such threats may sometimes warrant American action, but they are mainly matters of charity and human decency, not national security.

As it was, the United States chose the second option—expansion—but hesitantly. American leaders chose not to conceive of security in the strict sense of territorial integrity, political autonomy, and economic viability, but in the broader sense of a congenial world filled with ideological kindred devoted to optimizing economic exchange and resolving disputes through the rule of law. In this view, security ultimately requires extending the West's preferred world order. This ambitious alternative would push other societies toward organizing themselves and behaving according to the right values, and would suppress disorders that threatened the security not just of Americans but of foreign populations. This latter-day domino theory aimed to prevent threats from emerging by preventing local pathologies from metastasizing and eventually reaching Americans at home.

On balance, this has been the wrong choice. In the dozen-year hiatus between the opening of the Berlin Wall and al Qaeda's assaults on September 11, the United States experienced a holiday of sorts from the traditional rough-and-tumble of international conflict. It failed to take advantage of an excellent security situation in this period to manage a transition to a balance of power and modus vivendi with major states. Instead, Washington pushed to exploit unipolarity and dabble in attempts to stabilize and reform countries beset by violence. Some of the initiatives beginning in the 1990s that flowed from the urge to forge world order, promote democracy, and prevent bad behavior made sense, but it proved difficult to keep the sensible moves within bounds and avoid imbroglios that cost more to get out of than they were worth. In the 1990s, Washington also indulged an instinct for the capillaries, losing sight of the priority of relations with major powers that are more important than the messes in minor countries on which efforts fixated.[3]

Then came September 11th. National security policy reacted energetically, and, for a while, quite sensibly. Flushed with premature confidence from apparent victory in Afghanistan, however, George W. Bush seized

[3] Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as Social Work," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (January/February 1996).

the wrong opportunity and confused counterterrorism with war against Iraq. This venture gravely damaged American interests, worsening threats rather than relieving them. Even if the eventual outcome in Iraq proves reasonably stable, the cost will have far exceeded the benefit.

The frequency of resort to force came out of an elite consensus of strange bedfellows: conservative nationalists unapologetically happy to pump up America's number one status and get in the face of foreigners; cosmopolitan liberals anxious to make the world a cooperative marketplace in the mold of our own country; and neoconservative zealots aiming to do both. Explicit opposition was weak and limited to anti-interventionist paleoconservatives and liberals, minorities in both parties, at least until disappointments piled up. Opposition was latent in the greater skepticism of much of the mass public all along, skepticism that would only be activated by costly failure—which made the more-ambitious interventionists reluctant to push their visions except in cases where it seemed they might succeed with modest effort.

It would be a mistake to exaggerate the failures of post-Cold War uses of force or the unrealism of foreign policy leaders' planning principles. It is always easier to diagnose a mistake than to prescribe a reliable cure. It is especially unfair for critics to shake their fingers self-righteously when, unlike officials in the world of action, they have the luxury of hindsight and lack the responsibility for making things work in real life. It may not be true that good news is no news, but unfair as it may be, this essay focuses on the downside.

The idea that U.S. foreign policy has overreached is hardly novel at this point; indeed, it is even commonplace since the ordeals in Iraq and Afghanistan. Brinkmanship on Iran, however, shows that U.S. leaders remain undaunted. The impulse to overreach preceded all these ventures and is resilient. Criticism of post-Cold War military activism is not beating a dead horse, because the impulse never recedes indefinitely. Americans want to accomplish much at low cost and are even willing to pay high costs for big stakes. High costs were accepted in the twentieth century because the stakes were the survival and security of Western liberal democracy in the face of successive challenges from great powers and transnational ideologies. That long experience of worldwide struggle established habits that colored the approach to the world after victory, and that can revive when recent setbacks fade from attention. To appreciate the case for getting policy priorities on a different track, it helps to clarify the genuinely important dangers the United States faces, recognize the delusions that have driven some repeated mistakes, and confront the dilemmas that limit how well even sensible choices can produce good outcomes.

DANGERS

Americans face many potential threats to their safety, the worst of which may lie beyond the realm of national security properly conceived. Collapse of the international financial system is one disaster that is no longer unimaginable. Scientists can point to a number of potential natural catastrophes that could gravely damage human life—environmental devastation, uncontrolled pandemic disease, massive destruction from collision with asteroids, and so on. The risk of at least one such development is actually far greater than politicians and policymakers appreciate.[4] Related to natural disasters would be deliberate devastation inflicted by superempowered individuals or tyrants who make use of malign byproducts of bioengineering, hyperdeveloped artificial intelligence, and other technological advances.[5] Some of these overlap with issues of national security, but if the term has any meaning, national security must refer to the more specific category of military vulnerability and threats to the nation's political autonomy and fundamental economic viability.

In the strict sense of national security, the United States has faced far fewer dangers in recent years than it did before the 1990s, or than it may face some years from now. This should be obvious, yet a surprising number of policymakers and commentators, especially among liberals and neoconservatives, seem not to grasp the point. Now, more than two decades since the Berlin Wall opened, and under the immediate emotional impact of al Qaeda's fanaticism, many Americans have forgotten—or are too young to remember—the tremendously different nature and scale of the threats to "the American way of life" that energized permanent peacetime mobilization.

In the first half of the twentieth century, radical nationalist ideologies, fused with great-power military capabilities—German fascism and Japanese militarism—threatened the independence of the Western democracies and the huge countries of Russia and China, caused the deaths of fifty to seventy million people, and destroyed most of Eurasia. In the second half of that century, a universalist ideology, backed by Soviet and Chinese power, made a prolonged bid for the hearts and minds of people throughout the world. Although young people today may think that the fear of a now-defunct faith taking over the world must have been overwrought, Marxism-Leninism thrived and advanced in many regions. Communism was quite unlike radical Islam today, which is a mobilizing force and model for social organization

[4] Martin Rees, *Our Final Hour: A Scientist's Warning: How Terror, Error, and Environmental Disaster Threaten Humankind's Future in This Century—On Earth and Beyond* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). I thank Stephen Van Evera for bringing this sobering book to my attention.

[5] Fred Charles Iklé, *Annihilation from Within: The Ultimate Threat to Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

only in culture areas where the religion is already historically rooted. Rather it was an ideal with appeal and political clout to varying degrees in virtually every part of the world (except, perhaps, the United States). Until close to the end it was not inevitable that communists would lose the Cold War. In that context, muscular American activism to compete for control of political and military developments abroad made great sense.

The end of the Cold War blessed the United States with the least-dangerous outside world in living memory. That does not mean that recent dangers are small, or that they may not become awesome before long, but that they are more modest than the ones that shaped the modern American national security establishment. It means that since the Berlin Wall opened, Washington has faced nettlesome medium powers but no hostile great power, nor—with the single exception of a potential collective Arab oil embargo—any country or coalition with the power to threaten vital interests even if it became hostile. With the related exception of revolutionary Islamism (an exception whose potency should not be exaggerated), military and political threats today are local, not global, and have scant potential for contagion beyond their neighborhoods.

This window of extraordinary security could remain open for a long time, but not forever, if only because American primacy will not last forever. There are plausible threats on the horizon that are in the same league with those of the twentieth century. Some of the conceivable dangers were immanent in the disputes and crises of the past two decades. The difference in the post-Cold War world, however, was that policymakers had the freedom to devote most of their attention to matters that were of mild importance compared with the challenges of the past and, potentially, of the future.

DELUSIONS

Some mistaken resorts to force are traceable to enthusiasms common in American liberalism, enthusiasms that were liberated by the collapse of the bipolarity that had constrained them. (Liberalism here does not refer to the colloquial meaning of left-of-center in contemporary domestic politics. Rather it means the classic tradition venerating freedom, political equality, and economic openness that encompasses all of American politics and includes those we call conservatives and neoconservatives.) These enthusiasms have fed on three sets of misconceptions.

Liberal Universalism and the Habit of Empire

Americans have usually thought of their political order as exceptional, but a model for what the world should become. Many of us tend to assume

that deep inside every foreigner of good will must be an American struggling to get out. If other countries are given a fair chance, American exceptionalism should evolve into universal Americanism, or at least Western liberal democracy of some sort in tune with the United States. This has been the underlying political agenda in globalization to many in the U.S. foreign policy establishment, including majorities of both political parties.

The idea of an "empire of liberty" goes back to Thomas Jefferson, but for most of U.S. history, this hubris was held in check by the limits of American power and the inclination to promote the American model outside of North America by example rather than by force. A century ago, nationalism and crusading liberalism were given a mutually reinforcing boost by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Then, after 1945, Americans became accustomed to leading the "free world," and within the West, a liberal empire became institutionalized over the course of four decades. By the end of the Cold War, Washington had developed the habit of empire and turned from defending it to expanding it. The right and responsibility to advance democracy and human rights where possible were taken for granted, although there was much less agreement on whether this should be done if it required sacrifice.

The extent to which national security became tacitly identified with empire is reflected in how the structure of government defined organizations responsible for national security almost completely in terms of operation far from home rather than at our own shoreline. The National Security Council (NSC) and Department of Defense concerned themselves exclusively with defense lines far forward, on other continents, and the protection of allies, not direct defense of U.S. borders. Military forces were organized for combat in terms of a worldwide set of unified commands, each one with a huge headquarters and bureaucracy, overseeing a given foreign region (EUCOM for Europe, PACOM for Asia, CENTCOM for the Middle East, SOUTHCOM for Latin America, and AFRICOM for Africa), and each with a four-star military proconsul overshadowing U.S. ambassadors in the area. When terrorists brought foreign attacks to the continental United States for the first time since the War of 1812, brand new organizations were created to handle the threat—a Homeland Security Council, as if the security of the United States itself was not already in the portfolio of the NSC; a new military NORTHCOM for North America, as if the U.S. armed forces had not previously been concerned with operating on home territory; and a new Department of Homeland Security, as if protection of the homeland was not the responsibility of the Department of Defense. No other country in the world, not even the former European

imperial powers, has a military structure organized so thoroughly in terms of functions so far from home.

War as Policing

For some time after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Marxist ideology, unipolarity obscured the crucial difference between war and law enforcement. In a liberal world order, the rule of law is the norm, and in a unipolar world, the chief enforcer is far more powerful than any violator. In contrast to the Cold War, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Charter were recognized as pious but impotent norms that took a back seat to the competition for allies, those who rejected the rule of these documents came to be considered lawless and subject to discipline. To many policymakers, especially after the first Bush administration in the early 1990s, U.S. military force was an instrument that could be used to impose law, democratic norms, and world order—in effect, the United States could be "globocop." This role might be played in concert with the "international community," via the United Nations or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but participation in collective actions did not derail the misconception that force should usually be used lightly, because that idea is now even more ingrained in allied governments.

Some attempts to use force in this multilateral and limited manner—such as in the second phase of the Somalia intervention in 1993, "pinprick" punishments in Bosnia before 1995, or the initial assault on Serbia in 1999—proved ineffectual or surprisingly costly. This was because U.S. and NATO forces found themselves acting not as police suppressing individuals or small groups, but in acts of war, confronting organized mass resistance by force of arms. This was discomfiting to those who unleash force for humanitarian reasons, because they do not like the idea of killing people and breaking things even for good purposes. They hope for clean application of force without casualties, or at least combat in which only the guilty are destroyed and large numbers of civilian deaths are an aberration.

War, in contrast, inevitably hurts the innocent as well—and as anyone who has studied or experienced war will insist to those who hope otherwise, the stress is on *inevitably*. Deliberate targeting of civilians may be prevented, but the nature of real war is that accidental collateral damage is a regular cost of doing business. Accidental death and destruction can be reduced by improved technology or restraints on strategy, but it cannot yet be eliminated in any war of consequence. Law enforcement aims to protect the rights and interests of individuals by apprehending

transgressors and holding them to account for their crimes, and letting the guilty go free rather than unfairly harm an individual innocent. In war, the ultimate communitarian enterprise, the priorities are reversed; many individual interests are sacrificed for the nation's collective interest. Soldiers die for their countrymen, not themselves, and civilians caught in cross fires are simply out of luck. This fundamental empirical difference between policing and war is not easily grasped by people of good will. Before unleashing force, they need to recognize that war by its nature entails terrible injustice to many individuals, and that acceptance of that injustice as the lesser evil is implicit in any decision to send the military into combat.

Force undertaken as police action that turns into real war is a distasteful shock to politicians who expect that force can be used without injustice. The most-salient characteristic of war as distinguished from policing is that it involves *killing*. If politicians are to authorize war they must endorse killing. Many are reluctant to admit this. As a result, U.S. leaders have sometimes unleashed force, then recoiled from results and held back from decisive resolution of the issue. In short, they sometimes did not grasp what war is and stumbled into it irresponsibly.

Control on the Cheap and Primacy with Purity

Confusing police action with war is a symptom of general underestimation of the price of using force effectively and exploiting primacy to reshape the world. Underestimation was fatefully encouraged by the stunning success that marked the transition to the post-Cold War world: the 1991 war against Iraq. This was a powerful exception to the rule, an overwhelming, easy victory at low cost, executed under virtually complete control of the United States. That huge success, however, was due to sober restraint. George H.W. Bush (hereafter, Bush I) did not succumb to victory disease and did not grab for more gains than the liberation of Kuwait and reduction of Iraqi power—a cautious strategy to which his son should have kept.

To impose justice, stability, and cooperation on oppressed or ungoverned nations is usually a tall order. It is hardly ever done cheaply, especially against nationalist resistance. If accomplishing the task in some given case is likely to require 20 years of effort, hundreds of thousands of forces, and hundreds of billions of dollars, it is reckless to start the effort if one is only willing to commit less. Or if the strategic objective is just to coerce an adversary, it is usually a mistake to apply force abstemiously rather than with overwhelming power. Coercion is hard to accomplish without instilling overwhelming fear. As Carl von Clausewitz says, "A short jump

is easier than a long one: but no one wanting to get across a wide ditch would begin by jumping half-way."[6]

The logic of democracy, however, provides all too many reasons for jumping halfway. Either extreme alternative—inaction or overwhelming force—poses severe costs. Compromise is the natural political solution to ambivalence, the way to avoid facing either of those costs fully, at least in the short term. At the time decisions on force are made, avoiding the immediate extreme costs seems the most pressing necessity, and the long-term costs of indecisive war do not seem to be the necessary result of compromise. The long-term costs do not become evident until the compromise option is tried and fails, often after the authorities who make the decision have passed from the scene and handed the problem to successors.

Force and coercion are brutal by definition. Military effectiveness thus requires some measure of deliberate and willing brutality. Even then, the vagaries of politics, organization, culture, and individual leadership can derail a carefully constructed strategy. Any significant resort to force will hurt people on a large scale, without definite assurance of achieving its purpose. For these reasons, force should be used less frequently, with better reason, and with more conscious willingness to pay a high price than it has been in many cases since the Cold War.

DILEMMAS

Force is rarely better than a blunt instrument. There is no consistent formula for success, and many strategies risk counterproductive results. As with many of the most-difficult challenges in politics, leaders facing the question of force are too often damned if they do and damned if they don't, and too often reduced to working for the lesser evil. Among the dilemmas that dog policymaking and implementation several stand out.

Prudence or Paralysis

Deciding to kill people and destroy things for some political purpose—which is what a decision to use military force is about—must be a momentous choice. There are three potential outcomes from application of force, only one of which is better than refraining: the results can prove effective, achieving the political objective; ineffective, but leaving things no worse than the status quo ante; or worse than ineffective (counterproductive).

[6] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 598.

The currency of death and destruction, and inevitable uncertainty about what the results will be, mean that although force need not always be the last resort, the presumption should usually be against it unless the alternatives are unambiguously worse.

While action poses risks, however, inaction does too. Just as policymakers can never be certain that combat will make the situation better, they cannot be certain that refraining will not make it worse. Sober sensitivity to the drawbacks of force may underwrite excessive passivity. There are few cases in which policymakers can know with confidence that the results of war will be not only positive but low in cost; otherwise, the targets of force would usually concede without a fight. So a decision on force is a gamble, but there are no accepted rules for judging the odds of success, or accepted standards for what odds are too low to justify the gamble.

Counterterrorism and Unconventional Warfare: Attrition or Antagonism?

Straightforward conventional wars, like the first against Iraq in 1991, may kill many soldiers, but often the victims are mostly soldiers, who are always considered legitimate targets. Unconventional, irregular, or asymmetric warfare, in contrast, takes place in the midst of civilian populations, and collateral damage is usually extensive—and it is unconventional warfare that is most common in the unipolar world. Civilian casualties anger and alienate precisely the people whose loyalty is the main stake in the conflict. Holding back from combat because of the risk of accidental civilian casualties, however, gives insurgents or terrorists running room and respite from attrition and raises the combat risks to American soldiers. Even strenuous efforts to avoid collateral damage often fail, as mixed results from stringent U.S. rules of engagement in Afghanistan showed after the move to a revised counterinsurgency strategy.

This problem poses the risk of strategic judo—that rebels may use the strength of American military power against its purpose.[7] Combat action that is effective in direct attrition of the enemy but which mobilizes more locals against the American cause defeats itself. There is yet no sure standard for estimating how to strike the balance of risk between ineffective and counterproductive employment of military options.

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[7] This term follows what Daniel Ellsberg called "revolutionary judo" in "Revolutionary Judo: Working Notes on Vietnam No. 10" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, January 1970) (declassified October 2005); what Gene Sharp called "political *jiu-jitsu*" in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1973), 110, 453, 807; and what Samuel I. Popkin called "political judo" in "Pacification: Politics and the Village," *Asian Survey* 10 (August 1970), and Samuel I. Popkin, "Internal Conflicts—South Vietnam" in *Conflict in World Politics*, Kenneth N. Waltz and Steven Spiegel, eds. (Cambridge: Winthrop, 1971).

Overwhelming Force or Small Footprint?
This dilemma follows from the last. Force is most effective in direct suppression of opposition when it is massive and overpowering. Force used in small doses or hesitantly may fail to conquer, prolonging indecisive combat and thereby additional carnage. Or if the aim is coercion, force may fail by imposing insufficient costs and signaling weakness to enemy decision makers. Overwhelming force is likely to make conventional war shorter, and sometimes less destructive in the end. As the problem of strategic judo indicates, however, in unconventional warfare, the odds of winning the allegiance of a local population may decline with the size of a military presence and the scale of military operations. Minimizing alien intrusion and applying no more force than absolutely necessary may raise the odds of political success. Some situations fall between either category, leaving the trade-off hard to calculate.

Humanitarian Projects: Consistent or Capricious Selection?
Some cases of humanitarian emergency, such as starvation in Somalia in 1992, seem so easily relieved by minimal military effort that moral interests mandate a decision to act. Or others, such as the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, are so horribly egregious that holding back from intervention is inhumanly callous. The first type, however, can evolve into more-difficult ventures, as happened in the attempt to impose political order in Somalia after the food relief, and the gravity of the second type may not be evident at the outset. Between these extremes, moreover, lie a huge number of humanitarian crises of varying severity. The United States cannot act against all of them but should not foreswear acting in all of them. A simple standard for selection in principle is to act where the benefits are high and costs low. But this is often hard to know in advance, so choosing some cases for intervention but not others may be arbitrary. Policymakers may justify their selection on grounds that they know the right case when they see it, but such a standard is an instinct, not a strategy.

Deterrence or Provocation?
The most important uncertainty in dealing with adversaries is the "security dilemma"—determining whether they are evil aggressors bent on conquest or coercion, or defensive powers who prefer the status quo but feel insecure and arm or exert pressure as a precaution. The first must be deterred or defeated; the second may be better handled by reassurance. After Sarajevo in 1914, European governments rushed to combat when reciprocal restraint and sensitivity to the security dilemma might have avoided the catastrophe that followed; in 1938 at Munich, the British and French avoided that

mistake but made the opposite one, failing to recognize the unlimited aggression in Hitler's plans.

How can policymakers know for sure which type of adversary they face? If the diagnosis is wrong, the United States risks either being exploited by an aggressor it mistakenly thinks is defensive or provoking an unnecessary conflict with a peacefully motivated opponent that it treats as an aggressor. In the coming years, the question of diagnosis will be crucial in regard to China. Excessive emphasis on deterrence could make conflict a self-fulfilling prophecy as China chafes and pushes back; insufficient emphasis on deterrence could make China more opportunistic, adventurous, and willing to risk conflict.

Application of Force: Formulas or Flexibility?

There is a chasm between policy decision and military implementation. The complexity of any important strategic situation—technical limitations of modern military instruments and support structures, political context on both sides of a confrontation, quality and strength of an adversary's capabilities and will, unique opportunities or obstacles that emerge as a case develops, problems in communication, and so on—makes it extremely difficult to keep military action in line with policy objectives. Policymakers who lack military expertise and military technocrats who lack political sensitivity can all too easily proceed without making their moves consistent with each other's imperatives and constraints. Military professionals, keenly aware of how blunt an instrument military force is and how hard it is to control, crave clarity and simplicity in strategy and prefer to rely on tried and true drill-book formulas for combat effectiveness. Their priority is to minimize friction, avoid surprises, and keep control of military outcomes. They want war plans that account for all actions through all phases from beginning to a clearly defined end, so that they can do their jobs by the numbers. Politicians, in contrast crave flexibility, tentativeness, and adaptability of military operations, so they can raise or lower aims as conditions permit, take advantage of opportunities as they emerge, or back away from problems if they run into trouble. These natural differences in orientation and responsibility create permanent tension between those who decide to use force and those who carry out the decision.

Priorities: Benefits or Costs?

If an interest is vital, the United States should invest blood and treasure to protect it with little regard for limits. Although rhetoric always cites any interest as vital, however, few truly are; "vital" literally means *necessary*

to life. For most interests, the main policy question about committing force is the balance of costs and benefits when neither are extreme. Hawks usually care most about benefits, doves most about costs. Neither benefits nor costs, however, are easily estimated in advance.

Benefits are hard to calculate because they depend on counterfactual assumptions (what would have happened if the policy implemented had been different), or because they involve subjective judgments about effects on foreign governments' policies and motivations, or because they involve unquantifiable moral interests. Costs are hard to estimate for the same reasons, and because it is impossible to know for sure how much blood and treasure must be spent to achieve the purpose. The most fundamental material costs, however, are quite clearly denominated in numbers: casualties and dollars expended. Sometimes costs prove happily lower than anticipated, as in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. More often, they are higher than anticipated, as in Somalia, Kosovo, the second war against Iraq, and Afghanistan after 2002.

Such miscalculations follow easily from focusing on the balance of power rather than the balance of stakes. American primacy highlights the overwhelming disparity of power between Washington and whatever opponents it engages. On their home turf, however, the locals have a far higher stake in the outcome, and thus more incentive to bleed for their cause. These contests can then become limited conflicts for the United States but total wars for the locals, escalating into more than Washington bargained for.

Control without Control

The use of force has a political object, so when Washington uses force, it is with the aim of controlling a political outcome. As the only superpower operating in the post-Cold War world, the United States has had objectives that have not been simply matters of self-defense, as are those of most normal countries that do not aspire to control more than their own territory and political autonomy. Rather, the United States has aimed to shape world order and protect or reform other countries. A prime ingredient in this agenda is promotion of democracy in countries in which American forces intervene. All too often, however, these two objectives—shaping outcomes according to an American vision and democratization—work against each other. If democratization is achieved, Washington loses control of policy decisions and implementation in the country. Local politicians may or may not move their societies in directions consistent with American judgments of proper reform. At the same time that the United States loses control, it gets stuck with blame for what happens in the country as long as U.S. intervention continues. Thus the independent Afghan government

that followed the ouster of the Taliban descended into catastrophic corruption, incompetence, and double-dealing, and many Afghans blamed American intervention for the mess in their country.

As long as the United States plays the role of superpower, it is vulnerable to blame whether it promotes democracy or not, because a superpower has to do political and military business with all sorts of regimes. For decades, Washington supported the government of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, then scrambled to repudiate it when popular revolution broke out. Shifting gears to support revolution makes sense when there is hope that it can prove benign, and support for democracy is necessary despite the risks that it will come back to bite. But the United States will be criticized for sins of control even when it does not control, and lack of control doubles the risk when American military forces are entangled in direct efforts to pacify local conflicts. These problems should not obscure the reality that force is sometimes used for the right reasons and with satisfactory results. I am a genuine admirer of the American armed forces and their accomplishments and am happy when they are employed by political authorities who know what they are doing.

This argument is not consistent and unequivocal, as it should be were it to offer a powerful theory; hard problems in real life never admit of simple solutions without exception or qualification. But there has been an implicit effort spanning both national political parties to build (either multilaterally or unilaterally) a liberal empire. The most wrongheaded were the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush (Bush II). Less mistaken were Bush I, whose team was more prudent, or Barack Obama, who inherited the worst messes we had to confront, and who at least had the good sense to oppose the worst decision since the Vietnam War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The intellectual underpinnings of the wrong approach came from strange bedfellows, a combination of neoconservatives, liberal hawks, and fervent multilateralists. These groups would be outraged to be lumped together, but for different reasons they converged on the use of armed forces to further expansive rather than narrow conceptions of security. My arguments are closer, though not identical, to those of Andrew Bacevich, Barry Posen, Stephen Walt, Christopher Layne, Eric Nordlinger, Lawrence Korb, and other realist doves, cautious liberals, and paleoconservatives.[8]

[8] For example: Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Barry R. Posen, "The Case for Restraint," *American Interest* 3 (November/December 2007); Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2005); and Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

A hawkish stance on national security policy made sense in the Cold War, but winning that war should have made a bigger difference than it did. Strategic habits of mind established in that era lived on too heartily after the dangers that caused them. American national security policy should not exhaust itself on second order problems when it may need to exert itself again in the not distant future to manage a new bipolarity with a full-grown China. Before then American force may sometimes be necessary, but restraint should be the default option. When it is necessary, it should be used decisively rather than sparingly, foreswearing a false economy that too often yields prolonged entanglement or stalemate. In Clausewitz's terms we should not try to jump across most ditches, but when we do, we should not jump half-way.[9]*

[9] For elaboration of these arguments in regard to many aspects of recent policy see Richard K. Betts, *American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), chaps. 2–12.

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