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Pyrrhus on the Potomac: How America's post-9/11 wars have undermined US national security

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One more such victory and I am lost

– Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, after defeating the Romans at Asculum, 279 B.C.E. Attributed by Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives*

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America's unique position of power in the post-Cold War era has often inspired comparisons to that of Rome during the rule of Augustus. But the security policy adopted by the United States, especially since the 9/11 attacks, calls to mind a different ancient place and personage: Pyrrhus (318 - 272 B.C.E.), king of Epirus, a Hellenistic realm that comprised what is now northwestern Greece and southern Albania. Plutarch memorializes Pyrrhus as a "great man of war" – but also a fool. Although he waged successful campaigns against Macedonia, the Romans, and others, Pyrrhus was unable to preserve his gains, which came at great cost. In the end, his martial ambitions won him and his kingdom nothing but ruin and disapprobation. He is remembered today in the phrase "Pyrrhic victory"– meaning any victory not worth its cost.

The architects of the "war on terrorism" – now the "long war against Islamic extremism" – can point to a number of achievements since 11 September 2001 (outlined below). However, a comprehensive net assessment of their efforts shows them to be mostly "pyrrhic" in character. Measured in the coin of long-term security and stability, post-9/11 policy has cost more than it has gained.

> As recounted below, the various costs and risks undertaken as part of America's three post-9/11 wars are considerable. And many of these costs and risks are deferred ones. Yet, few of the goals that define current missions have been achieved or even seem close to realization. With regard to stemming terrorism: the problem has grown worse, not better.
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> The potentials for new and broader confrontations are growing as a direct consequence of current missions. This, because significant portions of the Muslim world have come to view US efforts as constituting a "war on Islam" – and also because potential US adversaries outside the Muslim world (notably China and Russia) have begun to organize themselves to resist perceived US "hegemonism".
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> While the potential for broader confrontation increases, America's capacities to win or manage these is diminishing. This is due to a gradual erosion of US military capabilities, the deleterious economic and fiscal effects of today's wars, and the

alienation of allied states and publics.

Undaunted and unapologetic, the Bush administration continues to argue the virtues of staying the present course. But, in light of our experience so far, this more and more tests the patience, credulity, fiscal sobriety, and risk tolerance of the American public.

1. Balance sheet on current missions

Al Qaeda: Still in the game

The operational capacity of the original "Al Qaeda" centered around Osama bin-Laden has been significantly degraded. Hundreds of former members have been killed or captured (mostly during the Afghan war). Nonetheless, the organization continues to function in a more decentralized form. Bin-Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri continue to provide guidance and encouragement to their followers, having issued 35 video and audio recordings from their redoubt in Pakistan.

Since 11 September 2001, Al Qaeda has directed, financed, or played an important role in 30 fatal operations in 12 countries causing 2500 casualties including 440 deaths. These figures, from the *Rand-MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base*, do not include the activities of al-Zarqawi in Iraq, nor do they include the activities of independent groups friendly to al-Qaeda.

Iraq and Afghanistan: Splendid disasters

US operations successfully toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Hussein regime in Iraq. In both countries, there are now elected governments, US influence is entrenched, and the US military has a virtually free hand. However, security and stability eludes both countries, economic development has stalled, and conservative Islamic forces dominate the political scene.

> The insurgency in Iraq is today conducting attacks at a higher rate than ever before. In Afghanistan, there has been a dramatic resurgence of Taliban activity, with the incidence of attacks up 74 percent from last year and the fatality rate up 140 percent, according to the Rand-MIPT terrorism database. There is little evidence of these problems abating.
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> Afghanistan is a "ten block democracy" where the writ of the central government barely extends beyond the capital before ceding to warlord rule. The country has become, once again, the world's leading producer of opium poppy, now providing approximately 92 percent of the world supply. Production is higher today than ever before – 59 percent higher than last year (UNODC, 2006). Eradication efforts have done little more than stimulate support for insurgency.
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> Iraq is characterized by anarchy in governance, national fragmentation, and civil strife. Insurgency and high-levels of intercommunal violence affect areas containing 50 percent of the population (if Basra is included). Death squads operate inside the security services and the penal system does not meet minimum human rights standards.

The Iraqi central government (as such) has little capacity to enforce its writ independently and, essentially, shares power with the US mission and with provincial, local, and factional centers. Indeed, the central government is itself fragmented with little conveyance of authority among the parliament, prime minister's office, and the individual ministries. Postwar reconstruction has stalled with low levels of achievement outside the "green zone". Oil production, access to potable water, and sewage disposal services have not yet recovered to prewar levels. Electricity generation finally surpassed the prewar level in May 2006. Unemployment stands at between 25 and 40 percent.

> The human cost of war in the two countries has been substantial. A reasonable estimate is that, at minimum, 70,000 Iraqis and Afghanis have died due to war-related violence (including excess criminal violence).

Although the Bush administration has viewed Iraq as pivotal to democratic transition in the region, the experience has instead associated democratization with foreign occupation, chaotic violence, and economic stagnation. Polls conducted during 2004 and 2005 by the University of Maryland and Zogby International in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE leave no doubt that Arabs tend to view the Iraq experience as detrimental to the region's prospects for peace, stability, and democracy.

2. Broader effects of post-9/11 wars

Increased terrorism

Overall, terrorist activity and violence has grown worse, not better since 11 September 2001. Average levels of terrorist violence that would have been considered extreme in the period prior to 9/11 have become the norm in the years since. And there is no sign that this trend is abating. This much is evident from a review of the terrorism incident database maintained by the Rand Corporation for the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT), which is funded by the US Department of Homeland Security. Surveying incidents for the period January 1998 through 11 August 2006 shows that:

> The rate of terrorism fatalities for the 59-month period *following* 11 September 2001 is 250 percent that of the 44.5 month period preceding and including the 9/11 attacks. This figure has been adjusted to account for the different length of the two periods and it implies an increase in average monthly fatalities of 150 percent. (Only in January 1998 did the database begin to include both national and international terrorism incidents.)
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> The rate of terrorist incidents for the post-9/11 period is 268 percent that of the period prior to and including 11 September 2001. This implies a 167 percent increase in what might be called the average monthly rate of incidents.
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> A fair portion of the increased activity is related to the war in Iraq – but not all. Removing Iraq from the picture shows an increase in the average monthly rate of terrorism fatalities of more than 10 percent for the post-9/11 period. The increase in the rate of incidents not counting Iraq is 75 percent.

Finally, it is worth noting, that if we divide the post-9/11 period into two equal halves, the

number of terrorism fatalities is greater in the second half than in the first – even when Iraq is excluded: ~4772 fatalities in the first half versus ~5177 in the second. There is no evidence here that the post-9/11 surge in terrorism fatalities is abating.

Terrorist Attack Incidents and Fatalities, 01/01/98 – 08/11/2006		
	01/01/98 – 09/11/2001	**09/12/2001 – 08/11/2006**
Fatalities per month	176	444
(minus 9/11 attacks)	109	
(minus Iraq)		195.5
Incidents per month	106	284
(minus 9/11 attacks)	105.9	
(minus Iraq)		186.5
MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base (Oklahoma City, OK: National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, 2006)		

Growing anti-American sentiments

As found in numerous polls, popular support outside the United States for the US-led "war on terrorism" has fallen precipitously since 2002 – as have positive sentiments toward the United States generally. This is true not only in most Muslim nations polled, but also among many of America's key allies in Europe. Majorities or pluralities see the Iraq war as contributing to the problem of terrorism and, in many countries, now see the United States as having a mostly negative influence on world affairs. In many Arab and Muslim states, majorities commonly feel that the United States may actually pose a military threat to their homelands. Such perceptions might be expected of populations in Syria and Iran – but it is true as well for citizens of Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. (See references in the public opinion section of bibliography.)

Although global public sentiments regarding the United States do not directly or immediately translate into policy change, voters in several allied countries – the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain – have punished their governments for pro-American stances. Political effects are more evident in Arab and Muslim countries.

Political advance of Islamic fundamentalism

Parallel with America's post-9/11 wars and counter-terror efforts, radical Islamic parties have increased their political influence substantially in more than a dozen nations, often campaigning explicitly against what they describe as a "war against Islam". Winning more votes during the past five than ever before, such parties have advanced their positions in Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

In Turkey and the Palestinian territories they now lead governments and probably could win power in Egypt, too, should fully free elections be conducted there. In Iraq, fundamentalist parties dominate government; in Iran, the conservative former mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, rose to presidential office in a campaign explicitly challenging US policy. In Lebanon, the influence and popularity of Hizbullah grew substantially during the post-9/11 period. Even its miscalculation in raiding Israel in July 2006 has not dented its support, with one poll showing more than 80 percent of Lebanese backing its confrontational stance.

In Bangladesh, Islamic parties have consolidated their position in the post-9/11 period, after winning a major role in government in October 2001. And, in Somalia, the Supreme Islamic Courts Council has become the predominant force in the country, although not by electoral means. US support for the opposing Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism and likely US support for the Ethiopian incursion into Somalia have only rebounded to the Courts' favor, which is attracting increasing support from warlord groups on the basis of nationalist appeals.

Nations balancing against US activism

Nations – including allied ones – also may have state reasons for "balancing" against the United States or impeding its policies. Along these lines, Germany, France, and Turkey impeded Operation Iraqi Freedom during its initial stage. More serious is the formation and expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – essentially a counter to perceived US hegemony – which includes as full members China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Observer status has been afforded to India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan. Among the policy priorities of the SCO are limitations on US efforts to secure new, enduring military bases in Central Asia.

Military activism by any great nation will increase the relevance of military power wherever that activism occurs. Thus, we should expect that US global activism will spur an increase in global military expenditure. And, indeed, global spending has increased in real terms by 28 percent since reaching a post-Cold War low point in 1997. Much of this is due to the United States, which now accounts for half of world military expenditures, but increased spending by Russia, China, India, and Pakistan is also significant. Indeed, average real expenditures are up in all regions except Central America and Western Europe.

3. Costs to the United States

Human cost

First among the costs of operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom are the 3,000 dead and 20,000 wounded US service personnel. Among the wounded we should as well include the 12 percent of returning veterans who are diagnosed as suffering from war-related mental health problems, as determined by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. (Hoge, et. al, March 2006).

Budgetary costs and effect on the economy

The monetary cost of operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom to the end of FY 2006 has exceeded $400 billion (including reconstruction assistance). Additional cost is presently accruing at a rate of approximately $10 billion per month. The broader fiscal context of this expenditure is defined by US federal budget deficits in the range of $400 billion per annum (on budget) and a gross national debt of $8.5 trillion – of which $2.5 trillion accumulated during the past five years.

There is no plausible scenario under which the ultimate "incremental cost" of current operations will not exceed $600 billion; the final cost probably will be much more. And this does not include other war-related costs to the federal government – such as veterans' benefits and increased interest payments. Nor does it encompass broader economic effects (which might include increased energy prices, interest rates, and opportunity costs). Two economists who have attempted such an analysis, Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University and Linda Bilmes of Harvard's Kennedy School, conclude that the total costs of the Iraq war alone may accumulate to between $1 trillion and $2.2 trillion – on the assumption of a gradual troop drawdown between 2006 and 2010. (Bilmes and Stiglitz, January 2006.)

Effects on the armed services

Today the United States maintains approximately 320,000 active-component military personnel overseas – either stationed or operationally deployed; in addition, there are more than 60,000 Guard and Reserve personnel abroad. Similar or higher numbers of troops were overseas for most of the past four years. Of the total today, more than 220,000 are operationally deployed in or around Iraq, Afghanistan, and other foreign territories.

Focusing on the active component: about 23 percent are now overseas. During most of the 1990s (after Desert Storm), the proportion overseas was approximately 17-17.5 percent. More telling: the average proportion of active-component troops involved in actual operations today is more than three times larger than in the mid- to late-1990s. And much of this stress is focused on the Army, which now routinely has one-third of its active component stationed or deployed overseas.

Together with other commitments, the war has required Marine units to deploy at rates more than 25 percent higher than what the service considers acceptable for long periods. Active Army units have been exceeding their deployment standards by 60 percent. These rates would have been even higher but that DOD leaned heavily on National Guard and Reserve units, deploying as many as 100,000 reserve personnel overseas at one time for tours averaging 342 days.

Not since the Vietnam era has the United States had such a large portion of its active-component armed forces at work overseas or deployed in operations as today. And not since the Korean war has it asked so much of its National Guard and Reserve troops.

High rates of operational tempo maintained over long periods are known to adversely affect training, morale, and discipline – causing a degradation in capability and problems in personnel retention and recruitment. The deleterious effects are already evident in the struggle to meet recruiting goals. In Fiscal Year 2005, five of the nation's 10 military components (counting active, reserve and National Guard) fell short in recruiting. The forces

also face a growing problem in retaining officers.

Several components have responded to today's stresses in ways likely to erode the longer-term capabilities of the forces: by raising age limits on enlistment and lowering the quality bar on recruitment and promotion. The services are also paying larger cash bonuses for enlistment and re-enlistment, which tends to roll costs forward because the bonuses are payable upon the completion of service terms.

Perhaps most important has been the extensive reliance on "stop loss" orders, which have compelled 50,000 service personnel to extend their time in service. This tends to mask the effects of high optempo, which will only become apparent when the resort to "stop loss" ends.

The stress on equipment is equally great, with utilization rates in Iraq exceeding peacetime standards by two- to ten-fold -- a pace that quickly eats into service life. Effected is 40 percent of Army and Marine Corps ground equipment, as well as other assets. In order to sustain high equipment availability rates, the services have tended to defer higher-level maintenance – again, rolling the costs of war forward. As the Government Accountability Office reported in March 2006:

> The services have made a risk-based decision to keep equipment in theater, to forego depot repairs, and to rely almost exclusively on in-theater repair capabilities... As a result, much of the equipment has not undergone higher level depot maintenance since the start of operations in March 2003. (GAO, March 2005, p. 8)

This will eventually render some equipment unrecoverable. And it increases postwar military "reset" costs. The Army alone estimates postwar recovery will require at least $24 billion to $36 billion.

(See appendix "Fighting on Borrowed Time: The Effect on US Military Readiness of America's post-9/11 Wars" at http://www.comw.org/pda/0609br19.html)

4. Recommendations

At the heart of the present imbroglio are several policy impulses that must be avoided in the future. First, there is the tendency to see "regime change" operations as essential to achieving our basic security goals. Second, there is an overweening faith in the utility of force as a precise instrument of policy and an insensitivity to its attendant costs, risks, and collateral effects. Finally, there is a tendency to expand the scope and objectives of military action, rather than focus them on discrete ends. With these errors in mind we can define the basic coordinates of a new course:

> First, the United States should focus its counter-terrorism efforts on a multi-faceted "campaign against the Al Qaeda network" as well as on allied organizations that *credibly target the United States or US citizens and assets abroad.* This criteria would not include every organization, movement, and insurgency that the Pentagon loosely lists under the acronym, AQAM – meaning "Al Qaeda and associated movements".
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> Second, it is appropriate that we place greater emphasis on meeting the general challenges posed by terrorism – and not just the "Islamic" sort. This recognizes the

failure of successive administrations to adequately prepare for and defend against post-Cold War challenges. Along these lines, greater investment in homeland security and appropriate intelligence, military, and law enforcement capabilities is sensible. Especially important is maintaining cooperative international security relationships. But this is not the same as conducting a generalized "war on terrorism" – much less a "war on Islamic extremism". Dedicated, counter-offensive military campaigns targeting networks and organizations should be decided and undertaken on a case-by-case basis. These need not all be viewed as part of some single grand "war". Instead, they are all part of adapting our security priorities, structures, and practices to the routine challenges of the post-Cold War security environment.

Third, US policymakers should exercise greater restraint when considering involving the nation as a combatant or a partisan in complex regional conflicts over which we have little control. The fact that terrorists or terrorism may play a role in a larger conflict does not by itself warrant direct US military involvement. Insurgencies, secessionist movements, and anti-regime movements often involve real and legitimate grievances. A common danger is implicating ourselves in conflicts that are partly driven by the actions or policies of allies over whom we have limited influence.

Fourth, extraordinary restraint is due when contemplating "regime change," military occupation, or operations aiming to suppress insurgencies that enjoy significant popular support. In all such cases: stable, predictable outcomes are very difficult to achieve, usually very costly, and often require protracted engagements. Also, they often are corrosive to the armed forces that undertake them. The real challenge for US policymakers is to find ways to achieve essential security goals without resorting to large-scale high-risk adventures.

Fifth, attempts to impose democracy by military means – that is, by means of war or by threats of military action – tend to be counter-productive. This, because they typically arouse strong nationalistic reactions. Under threat, populations are more likely to rally around their governments and more willing, not less, to forgo democratic rights. The wisest course is to demilitarize US support for democratic transition. From a security policy perspective, the real challenge for policymakers is to find ways to defend the nation short of requiring societal transformation on a global scale.

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