

Will Washington Give Arms To Ukraine?

WASHINGTON – Back in February 2014, right after a popular rebellion ousted pro-Russian President Viktor Yanucovych, this way taking over political control in Kiev, the then Obama administration was long on promises of aid and support; but very short on delivering almost anything of real value to the new supposedly pro-American and pro-European Ukrainian government.

Economic basket case

On the economic front, Ukraine was then (and still is today, by the way) a virtual basket case: an impoverished, non competitive, underperforming economy, poisoned by systemic corruption. On the military side, whatever your political preference on who is to blame for the ongoing fighting between government forces and pro-Moscow ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine, back in 2015 it became obvious that Washington was not going to support the new anti-Russian Kiev government in any meaningful way.

Non lethal military aid

President Obama offered some non lethal equipment, (such as radar, night vision goggles), MREs, (military food rations), blankets, uniforms, and socks, (yes, socks), to the Ukrainian army –but no real weapons.

New Trump approach?

Now, with Trump in the White House, most recently the noises have been changing. It is no accident that U.S. Secretary of Defense Mattis recently made a high-profile visit to Kiev on that country's Independence Day. During public celebrations which included a military parade, Mattis stood at the side of

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Mattis trip to Kiev followed another important visit to Ukraine by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in July.

In public remarks in Kiev Mattis stated that the Pentagon is reviewing options that could include supplying real weapons to Ukraine; including anti-tank Javelin missiles, and possibly anti-aircraft missiles.

Of course, Mattis insisted that this American hardware—assuming a US Government decision to send it to Kiev—falls under the category of defensive weapons. America's stated goal—again, assuming a green light on this—would be to give Ukraine the tools to defend itself from Russian attempts to unilaterally change borders in the East.

Mattis justified any possible U.S. policy shift regarding weapons sales to Ukraine by pointing out that Russia is not living up to its commitments under the Minsk agreements aimed at solving through peaceful means all issues related to the future of ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine.

Policy shift

Well, should these supplies of U.S. weapons to Ukraine actually take place, this would indicate a major policy shift from the “do nothing” Obama years. For several years, Obama's deeds (forget his speeches in support of Ukraine) indicated that America would not get involved, even indirectly, in any conflict involving Russia in Eastern Ukraine, a region with deep historic, ethnic and religious ties to the Russian state. With Obama in the White House, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko realized that he was on his own.

Now Donald Trump is President. So, a new more muscular approach to Ukraine in Washington vis-a-vis Russia? We shall see. Despite what Secretary Mattis just said in Kiev, I am inclined to believe that the Trump administration does not want America enmeshed, even if indirectly, in yet another,

almost impossible and probably endless conflict, far from home.

A crowded national security agenda

Let's look at the long "to do" list for the U.S. military, when it comes to hot spots. Washington is and will be engaged in the Middle East, (Iraq and to a lesser extent Syria) for quite some time. The President just announced a more muscular and open-ended policy towards Afghanistan, with the stated goals of defeating the Taliban insurrection. And then you have creeping and potentially explosive crises with North Korea, Iran, and may be with China on the South China Sea. Based on recent Washington moves and public pronouncements, we may also have to add Venezuela to this already long and challenging national security agenda.

Does Washington want to add an insoluble conflict in Eastern Ukraine to the headaches list, while cash strapped America has a hard time keeping up with existing and potential commitments? I do not think so.

America Needs Ballistic Missiles Defenses

WASHINGTON – The news of North Korea's successful test of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, (ICBM), a missile that could theoretically hit the United States mainland is bad enough. But it gets much worse when combined with a just released assessment compiled by U.S. intelligence stating that North Korea may have also mastered the ability to miniaturize a nuclear warhead so that it can be fitted on the tip of its new ICBMs. Taken together, all this means that North Korea

could soon have the capability to launch a nuclear armed intercontinental missile that could reach Seattle, Minneapolis, even Chicago or New York City. A very unpleasant prospect, given the paranoid leanings of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un.

No defenses

But it gets worse. These unexpected developments from North Korea reminded all Washington policy-makers that America does not have real defenses against missile attacks. Yes, you got it right. America lacks meaningful defensive systems capable of neutralizing even a small scale missile attack originating from a third rate rogue state like North Korea. In simple language: we cannot be assured that we can shoot down and incoming missile before it hits America.

Yes, believe it or not, America has essentially no missile defenses. To be precise, America has some systems. But they are rudimentary and probably not accurate.

Regarding a possible nuclear attack from the Soviet Union, (later on Russia) or China, Washington relied and relies on its massive nuclear deterrent, that is on the power of dissuasion embedded in a guaranteed retaliatory strike against an attacker. Which is to say that deterrence –a credible threat of massive retaliation against an attacker– is in essence our only protection.

Deterrence

The conventional wisdom has been and still is that no "rational" foreign leadership would consider attacking the United States with nuclear weapons, knowing that the U.S., even if mostly destroyed, would still retain a lethal retaliatory force consisting of many nuclear missiles carried by its fleet of submarines. No "rational actor" would attack America knowing in advance that America, even if mortally wounded, would retain the capability to inflict intolerable

damage on the attacker.

That said, deterrence applies only to “rational actors”. However, when North Korea and soon enough Iran will have nuclear weapons and ICBMs to deliver them on target, we enter a completely new dimension. A dimension we are currently not prepared for. These are not “rational actors”. Therefore deterrence may not apply to them.

The Strategic Defense Initiative

So, what do we do? Well, a few years ago the U.S. Government articulated a revolutionary “Grand Plan” aimed at neutralizing not just some, but all nuclear weapons. Way back in the 1980s, then President Ronald Reagan was sold on the idea that we could render all nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete” by developing a variety of anti-missile systems which could hit incoming ICBMs before their warheads could reach their targets on U.S. territory.

Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, (SDI) –the Pentagon program created with the objective of developing the necessary anti-ballistic missiles technologies and weapons systems– was launched with much fanfare and a great deal of hype.

President Reagan promised that U.S. technological prowess soon enough would allow America to deploy layers of fully functioning systems able to protect America from any nuclear attack by hitting missiles and warheads before they could reach their targets on U.S. soil. These systems would render all nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete”. No point in developing nuclear weapons if they could be destroyed before they could be detonated.

It did not work

But SDI did not work out as advertised. The technological challenges were and still are immense. The task of hitting literally thousands of small targets traveling at fantastic

speed, with absolute accuracy, seemed too daunting. After Reagan left the political scene in January 1989, Washington's focus shifted elsewhere.

Nonetheless America kept investing, albeit only modestly, in new anti-ballistic missiles technologies that could deliver effective systems down the line. Following this trend, at the beginning of his new administration, (January 2001), President George W. Bush made ballistic defense one of his national security priorities.

Renewed efforts in the new millennium

With the objective of pursuing more modern systems, the Bush administration in 2002 decided to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that the U.S. had signed with the Soviet Union in 1972, (and still enforced by the Russian Federation). By withdrawing from the ABM Treaty, an agreement which limited the numbers and types of anti-ballistic missiles that both the USSR and the US could deploy, Washington gained the latitude to test and eventually deploy new systems in line with the goals set forth by the National Missile Defense Act.

Unfortunately, 9/11 and its aftermath dramatically changed American national security priorities. Because of the two long and costly wars, first in Afghanistan and then Iraq, the Bush administration did not devote meaningful resources to its anti-ballistic missiles programs.

Insufficient resources

The Obama administration which followed 8 years of Bush in January 2009 certainly did not recognize the urgency of this defensive program. It funded some work on anti-ballistic missile systems, but only very modestly in the ensuing 8 years.

As a result today, as we face an increasingly real North Korean nuclear threat, we have almost nothing in place to

defend America against incoming nuclear armed missiles. As indicated above, we have some systems. But they are small in terms of the number of deployed interceptors, and not necessarily accurate. Therefore they are unreliable.

No military or diplomatic solution

As many have already concluded, there are no good options when it comes to eliminating the North Korean nuclear threat through military means. Attacking North Korea's missile sites and other facilities connected with its nuclear programs, while possible, most likely would trigger a general conflagration in the Korean peninsula, with the almost inevitable direct involvement of South Korea, China, and possibly Japan.

Non military solutions do not exist. Diplomacy will not convince Kim Jong-un to scrap its nuclear program, simply because this is the only asset he has that gives him international standing. Without nuclear weapons North Korea is just a grotesque aberration: an impoverished police state run by a crazy despot.

The recent new round of UN sanctions imposed against North Korea, should not create false hopes. The Security Council unanimous vote has been applauded because it may lead us to believe that China is finally coming to our side. But it is not so.

China will not help

As long as China keeps the North Korean economy and state above water –and there is no sign that Beijing will cut all economic ties with its old ally– North Korea will continue to have the financial and technical means to continue its nuclear weapons programs. Therefore, do not count on more UN sanctions as the tool that will make this emerging nuclear threat against America and its allies go away.

Redouble our efforts

All in all, even recognizing that Washington wasted at least 10 years doing almost nothing when it comes to creating defensive systems against nuclear armed ballistic missiles, now is the time to redouble our efforts and invest in state of the art interceptors and other devices that some day will neutralize the threat posed by rogue nuclear states.

US Enacted Sanctions Against Russia

WASHINGTON – It should not come as a surprise that Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to retaliate in kind, after the US Congress passed a bill (subsequently signed into law by President Trump) that includes tough economic sanctions against Russia, as retribution for Russia's alleged interference in the US 2016 elections, and for unrelated issues pertaining to its meddling in Ukraine and more.

Punish Russia

Back in 2016, then US President Barack Obama ordered punitive measures against Russian diplomats stationed in the USA based on US intelligence findings that Russia had actively attempted to interfere in the U.S. elections via hacking and other cyber attacks. The sanctions included the expulsion of a number of Russian diplomats. These sanctions were included in a presidential directive issued by Obama. As such they could have been rescinded by the new president. But now the tougher sanctions have been enacted by the Congress and therefore

President Trump will not be able to eliminate them or modify them unilaterally.

Putin's reaction

After the US Congress passed this law containing sanctions, by a huge margin in both houses, Putin decided to get even, as he realized that these are "veto proof" majorities. In other words, even if he wanted to, a more conciliatory President Trump could not have blocked this legislation.

Putin's objective seems to get even. In order to bring the number of US diplomatic personnel in Russia down to the same level of what Russia is allowed to have in the United States, (455), 755 American diplomats will have to leave Russia. This is a major cut.

Impact

Will this move affect Washington Moscow based diplomats' ability to engage Russia in a meaningful way? Probably yes, even though it is not clear at this time which sectors of the bilateral relationship will be mostly affected by these significant cuts.

Most of all, this sequence of tough actions and counter actions indicates that US – Russia relations are in very bad shape, without any signs of improvements.

No Ambassador

To make things worse, keep in mind that the U.S. currently has no Ambassador in Moscow. Former Utah Governor and now Chairman of the Atlantic Council Jon Huntsman has been nominated by President Trump to fill that post, but he has not yet been confirmed by the Senate.

Once confirmed, will Huntsman, an astute businessman who also served as U.S. Ambassador to China, be able to help turn things around? There are at least some areas in which

Washington and Moscow can find common ground. At some point, there will have to be some kind of agreement on the future of Syria. There is also an opportunity to convince Russia that it is not to its ultimate advantage to be on the same side of Iran in the Middle East.

Common front on North Korea?

And finally there is the looming threat of North Korea's long-range ballistic missiles, soon to be armed with nuclear warheads. North Korea's threat is clearly aimed at the USA and its allies, South Korea and Japan. But Russia cannot be too happy with the idea of an unstable regime capable of launching nuclear armed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, (ICBMs) at its door step.

The Russia probe cloud

That said, for the bilateral relations climate to improve, the whole "Russia probe" now led by former FBI Director Robert Mueller must be concluded in Washington. Indeed, whatever the outcome of Mueller's investigations, only after he is done it will be possible to go back to a "normal" dialogue between Moscow and Washington.

That said, in the end, both sides must know that there is nothing to be gained when the two most important nuclear powers on earth do not engage with each other. Nuclear war between Russia and America is a very, very remote possibility. But such a possibility may be increased by misunderstandings and misperceptions.

Notwithstanding the sharp differences between the two countries, open lines of communication are an essential tool that will help prevent fatal errors. And both sides should know that they need competent diplomats in each other's capitals to keep those lines open.

America Cut Funds to Syrian Rebels

WASHINGTON – After the fall of Aleppo, I concluded that the Syrian opposition to Assad had been essentially defeated. Sure, some resistance still exists. But the chances of overthrowing Assad via military actions is a dream. Americans (half-hearted, in my view) efforts to force regime change in Damascus by supporting the domestic Syrian opposition through military assistance have failed.

No more US aid to the opposition

Now we learn that the Trump administration about a month ago decided to stop helping the Syrian rebels via a CIA operation code-named “Timber Sycamore”. I call this cutting one’s losses and moving on.

Of course, some analysts immediately argued that cutting off the rebels is a big Trump favor to Russian President Putin. A big favor without getting anything in return. They argue that arming the Syrian rebels was smart policy, because it created a pressure point against the Assad regime that could have been used at a later date as a bargaining chip during negotiations about a future settlement of the conflict in Syria.

It did not work

May be so. But, while the details about how much money was spent and how cost-effective this operation has been are not publicly available, the truth is that the Syrian opposition aided by the US and several Arab countries was never very effective; and now it has been essentially beaten. Not

completely destroyed. Still, after the fall of Aleppo, it lost any chance of overthrowing the Damascus regime, or even inflicting serious damages to it.

Accept defeat

The Trump administration seems to have accepted this; while it is keen on focusing on the ongoing fight against the Islamic State, or ISIL. Therefore: *“Let’s cut or losses, concentrate our efforts on beating ISIL, and stop throwing good money after bad”*.

New consensus

There seems to be a new consensus within the US Government that removing Assad from power is no longer a priority. (Obama instead repeatedly declared that Assad “had to go”, because of his violations of human rights and other crimes against the Syrian people). Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and others actually said publicly that the removal of President Assad is no longer a precondition for any serious talks about the future of Syria.

Waste of money

Given all this, continuing a CIA funded operation aimed at arming a few Syrian rebels who do not have any realistic chances to achieve much against regular pro-Assad forces backed by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, seems like a waste of time and money.

Betrayed

Of course, if you were part of a Syrian rebels group that had been included in this CIA funded program and you were counting on continuing American military and financial support, you have every right of feeling betrayed. But this would not be the first time in which allies of America have been dropped by Washington, on account of larger strategic considerations.

Why Is Montenegro Joining NATO A Big Deal?

WASHINGTON – With the US Senate approving by a huge margin Montenegro entering NATO, the US-led security pact, (only 2 senators opposed), soon enough this small country, once a region of the former Yugoslavia, will join the western military alliance created on April 4, 1949 with the Treaty of Washington. In “normal” times, this tiny NATO enlargement should not be an event that would move the needle one way or the other.

Montenegro is small

Indeed, on the face of it, Montenegro NATO membership should be a “non issue”. Hard to believe how a very small Balkan nation, with a population of 650,000, an army with only 2,000 soldiers, and a country GDP that is about the same size as the budget of the New York City police force, will alter the balance of forces in Europe.

A symbol

And yet, it is a sign of the times we live in that this issue of Montenegro and its accession into NATO somehow has become a big deal. Russia sees this step of Montenegro joining NATO as further evidence of a relentless eastward NATO expansion, most likely with the intent of encircling the Russian Federation, therefore creating a national security threat for Moscow.

Sending a message to Moscow

The US and other western countries instead want to portray the extension of NATO's protection to this small Balkan nation as a manifestation of western political resolve. Russia is accused of trying to alter unilaterally the post war borders of Europe. Washington extending a helping hand to Montenegro, this way guaranteeing its security from possible external threats, supposedly would send a signal to Estonia, Poland and other NATO members bordering Russia: *"America is here to stay in Europe. No intention to leave. Abiding by the letter of the NATO Treaty, Washington pledges that it will stand by its allies, large and small, no matter what"*.

Adding more complexity to the Montenegro accession issue, it is clear that the country was and is divided on this matter. Pro NATO political forces have accused Russia of meddling.

Moscow and Washington should address distrust issues

Be that as it may, instead of using tiny Montenegro as a political symbol, it would be better for both Washington and Moscow to get together and seriously try to find common ground regarding legitimate security concerns. No, NATO is not about to attack Russia. By the same token, NATO should recognize Russian concerns regarding ethnic Russians outside of the borders of the Russian Federation, and Moscow's historic connections with Slavic nations in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The way forward should include ways which will enable Russia to feel more secure, while NATO countries can be convinced that Russia will use diplomacy, and not military force, (or subversion), to further its political interests in Eastern Europe and other border areas.

Find a way to improve East-West relations

Montenegro's accession to NATO will change nothing when it comes to the balance of forces in Europe. However, the very fact that we are even talking about this enlargement of the western alliance as a real problem, contributing to the

further deterioration of East-West political relations, is indicative of the under currents of deep distrust between the US and Russia.

It should be in the interest of both Washington and Moscow to address this distrust.

The Obama Foreign Policy Record

WASHINGTON – The almost universally accepted narrative dished out daily by the serious, high brow U.S. media is that come January 20, 2017, with Donald Trump as President, we shall have 4 years of “*Amateur Hour*” in U.S. foreign policy. This dismal prospect is of course a far cry from the thoughtful, insightful and properly balanced foreign policy agenda expertly crafted and implemented by President Barack Obama and his top-notch foreign and national security policy team.

The incompetents are taking over

We are told by savvy analysts that, all of sudden, from reliable, steady competence that –as we all should know– raised American prestige worldwide, we shall plunge into an abyss of policy mayhem stirred by dangerous ignorance mixed with laughable (or dangerous) braggadocio, with a stupendously unqualified Commander in Chief at the helm.

Condescension

This narrative is another expression of the Olympian condescension of the perennially entitled leaders of the Washington foreign affairs establishment. They simply cannot

get used to the reality of a complete outsider, with no real hands-on experience in this field until now reserved to few insiders, now in charge.

Trump is inexperienced

True, Trump is inexperienced. He may indeed fail in foreign policy, and we should not take this prospect lightly, as there are bound to be consequences. On the other hand, he may not fail, after all. Trump will have a team working for him. Most of the people he picked thus far have considerable international and national security experience.

Right mix?

That said, has he chosen the right mix of people? Even more important, when confronted with difficult decisions, in murky situations when there is no obvious right policy choice, will Trump have the right instincts? Will he manage to safeguard –better yet, advance– the American National Interest? Quite frankly, we do not know yet. Time will tell.

Obama's record

However, while we can only speculate about the future, we do know a great deal about the Obama Team foreign policy record. And, no, it is not stellar. Contrary to the official narrative, the supposedly expert hands that have been in charge until now are not shining stars. And Obama is no great leader when it comes to directing U.S. foreign affairs. Hesitation, mixed messages and retreat have defined American foreign policy under his stewardship.

Now, after George W. Bush's profoundly ill-advised pro-democracy enthusiasm which led America into two horrendously costly and mostly unsuccessful wars –Afghanistan and then Iraq– a new foreign policy guided by restraint was indeed a welcome change after the 2008 elections. But there is a huge distinction between careful, calculated withdrawal behind

defensible lines, while spelling out U.S. continuing strategic priorities, and policy confusion leading to retreat.

Allowing chaos in Iraq

In Iraq, President Barack Obama used Baghdad's intransigence regarding the legal status of U.S. troops which would stay on after December 2011 as a good excuse for ending the negotiation with then Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. With no deal with Baghdad in place, the U.S. pulled completely out of Iraq at the end of 2011.

At that time Iraq was a relatively stable but still fragile and politically split country (Sunni in the North, Shia in the South) in which America had invested an enormous amount of resources. Pulling out completely while the wounds had not healed was an ill-advised and in the end horribly wrong decision.

To this day, President Obama claims he had no choice, given the uncooperative stance of the Baghdad government. But this is nonsense. If the Obama administration really wanted a deal with Prime Minister al-Maliki that would have allowed a substantial U.S. military presence after 2011 it would have found a way to get one.

Get out

The fact is that Obama wanted out of Iraq, entirely for domestic political reasons. He wanted out of Iraq in order to show to the American people that he had made good on a major campaign promise: he had brought all the troops home. And, in fact, later on he repeatedly bragged about this "accomplishment" represented by the closing of the Iraq War chapter. Which is to say that concerns about Obama's popularity at home caused America to essentially abandon a country in which it had invested years, hundreds of billions, and so many lives of killed U.S. soldiers.

Could sizable American troops stationed in Iraq have prevented the steady descent into chaos that followed their departure? We do not know for sure. But it is not far-fetched to believe that they could have helped keep things together.

Belated U-turn in 2014

That said, Obama was forced to make a complete U-Turn on Iraq when this deeply divided country was confronted with an invasion masterminded in 2014 by the Islamic State, or ISIL from its bases in Eastern Syria. A massive invasion, by the way, that the sophisticated Obama intelligence leaders never saw coming.

With no U.S. troops on the ground, (thanks to Obama's complete troops withdrawal decided back in December 2011), ISIL breezed, mostly unopposed, into Northern Iraq. In a matter of days it took over Mosul –the second largest city in the country– and the entire North West of Iraq. An eyewitness quoted by *The Guardian* said that:

“The city [Mosul] fell like a plane without an engine. They [ISIL] were firing their weapons into the air, but no one was shooting at them.”

Beyond taking over Mosul, ISIL captured vast amounts of cash and a huge arsenal of U.S. supplied weapons and material, simply because the Iraqi troops had run away.

So, here is the upshot regarding Obama's record on Iraq: U.S. troops out; ISIL in. The Caliphate takes over 1/3 of the country within days. America forced to move back in. But slowly and with hesitation. Meanwhile, militias funded by Iran spread through the country. This is complete policy failure.

Surge in Afghanistan?

In Afghanistan, President Obama started with an almost comical public debate in the Fall of 2009 (first year of his mandate)

about what U.S. policy should be regarding the continuing Taliban insurgency. Obama finally ended the deliberations in November 2009 with a commitment to a “Iraq-like” surge in Afghanistan. But it was a surge accompanied by a publicly announced withdrawal timetable.

Yes it was just like that. Washington would send additional troops aimed at stabilizing this perennially chaotic country; but only for a short while. How ill-advised. You go to war not to shoot around a little bit, and then go home. You go to war to win. Or you do not go at all. Result? 20016 is over and the war in Afghanistan is still going on. This is another failure due to Washington’s indecisiveness and half measures.

Get rid of Ghaddafi

Then there was Libya, and the ill-conceived idea of toppling dictator Ghaddafi, without even a thought of a game plan about what to do afterwards. Result? Ghaddafi was toppled and he is certainly dead. But so is Libya, now a failed state torn apart by various warring militias. This is failure number three.

Hesitation about Syria

And what about Syria? in 2011, at the beginning of the Arab Spring, President Obama declared that President Assad heavy-handed repression of initially peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations was intolerable. Assad, Obama declared, “*had to go*”.

Strong words. However, this clear statement of a U.S. policy objective –nothing but regime change would do for Syria–lacked even the semblance of a policy aimed at obtaining the outcome: make Assad go.

This incoherence between grandiose objectives and no policy to implement them was only the beginning of a half-hearted U.S. policy in support of some factions within the Syrian opposition.

Military planners should know that a little bit of support is not enough. In war, either you are in or you are out. Even if your method is to support the opposition, as opposed to sending your own troops, you have to be with them all the way. Support to your side in the conflict has to be decisive. The objective must be victory.

Media criticism

Well, even the serious usually pro-Obama media, after years of U.S. half measures, recognized that Syria is a huge policy failure for Obama. this is a BBC analysis dated October 2015:

“[Regarding Syria] the philosophical discussion at the White House was heated and fierce, leading to stalemate, not resolution.

For years Obama and his deputies refused to say categorically: we’re not doing this. Instead a decision was postponed.

Four years later, the result is a splintered Syrian opposition, the growth of the Islamic State group and a humanitarian disaster stretching across Europe.

Last year, in a move that was more symbolic than serious, Obama asked Congress for money to fund a programme allowing US personnel to teach rebels marksmanship, navigation and other skills.

The goal was to train about 15,000 rebels in Jordan and other countries so they could return to Syria and fight. However, US defence officials admitted last month [September 2015] that only four or five of the recruits in the programme had actually returned to the battle.”

It ended badly

And this was the BBC, a fairly sympathetic voice. A year later, things got only worse. The result of years of U.S. policy confusion and half measures is a semi-destroyed Syria,

Russian massive intervention in support of Assad, the Iranians and Hezbollah firmly planted there, a defeated opposition just driven out of Aleppo, not to mention untold numbers of dead people and millions of refugees. And now, a new ceasefire was arranged by Russia in partnership with Turkey and Iran. The U.S. is not even at the table. Talk about American retreat. This is a colossal policy failure.

ISIL in Iraq

And then there is ISIL in Iraq, the worst consequence of the U.S. total military withdrawal from the country it had invaded back in March of 2003. In a speech to the Nation, on September 10, 2014, President Obama sounded really tough about ISIL and the threat that it represented for the region and indeed the world.

He declared that: *“Our objective is clear: we will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy”*.

It sounded that America really meant business. To begin with, Obama told the world that Washington had assembled a powerful coalition of 66 countries. Impressive? Not so much. If you care to dig just a little bit, you discover that this unbeatable anti-ISIL Armada includes heavyweights like Luxembourg, Somalia, Iceland, Bosnia, Bahrain, Romania, Cyprus, Estonia, Panama, Montenegro, Latvia and Albania. Are you still impressed?

Painfully slow progress

And the American military effort has also been modest. Two years later, while there have been significant successes against ISIL, we are still not done. Coalition supported Iraqi forces, (by the way this would also include support from Iran) are getting closer to Mosul; but they are still far from retaking it and eventually driving ISIL out of Iraq, let alone “destroying” it, as Obama pledged.

This is almost inconceivable. ISIL is a bunch of nasty thugs who use barbaric methods. But ISIL is not the German Wehrmacht smashing France, or the Japanese Imperial Army conquering Manchuria or the Philippines. It is a rag-tag, third-rate military force. It is unbelievable that America, with the largest and most technologically advanced military force in the world, could not destroy the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate in a matter of weeks.

To the contrary, a recent *Washington Post* story indicated that this battle against ISIL is going to be long slug:

"[...] But a full offensive to retake the city [of Raqqa, de facto capital of ISIL] could still be months or more away, despite hopes in Washington that an operation to take the Islamic State's most symbolically significant stronghold would be well underway before President Obama left office."

This slow and uneven progress is the military outcome of policy confusion and partial military engagement. Despite Obama's clear commitment a couple of years ago, the mighty U.S. still has not managed to "degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL".

Pivot to Asia?

And there are many more examples of grand plans that yielded little. Consider the pivot to Asia. Nice idea; but little to show in terms of results. Suffice to say that China, just as America publicly committed to shift its policy focus on Asia, has managed to increase its sphere of influence throughout most of the South China Sea –essentially unchallenged.

True, the Obama administration made all the right noises when confronted with the evidence that China is busy building up and militarizing small islands scattered across the South China Sea that it occupied with the bogus justification that these rocks (some of which do not even qualify as "land" according to international law) have always been under Chinese

sovereignty.

The Obama administration has not been able to challenge this creeping Chinese expansion, nor has it been capable or willing to persuade the Chinese to retreat and get out.

Iran

I am purposely leaving out of this analysis the Iran nuclear deal, because it is a lot more complicated than these other issues, and because in Iran's case the Obama administration acted with purpose towards a fairly clear policy objective: freeze the Iranian nuclear program. And this objective has been reached. While there are many vocal critics of the deal, none of them seem to have a better plan. Just getting out of a "bad deal" without having anything to replace it will not yield better outcomes.

Obama's retreat

Anyway, you get the picture. Clearly, it is always easy to point out foreign policy failures with the benefit of hindsight. Of course, it would be completely unfair to blame Obama for an Arab World in chaos, and other major troubles.

Still, the net result of Obama's 8 years in office is not stellar.

All in all, U.S. policies regarding Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and ISIL reveal a pattern of hesitation, in fact genuine confusion, and the inability to define, articulate and pursue what in Obama's mind is the U.S. national interest.

What U.S. retreat signals to the world

It would be disingenuous to conclude that all these failures, mixed messages and retreats from the world stage do not matter, because America after all is still the most powerful country on earth.

It is obvious that other political leaders around the world look at both American military capabilities and American political will. If they conclude that America lost its will, its powerful military forces will not deter as much as they used to.

Will Trump be better?

In the end, it is perfectly alright to express doubts about President-elect Trump ability to articulate a mature U.S. foreign policy. Still, the idea that come January 20 2017 the rowdy, clueless children are taking over, while the thoughtful grown ups have been driven out of the room is nonsense.

Quite frankly, if the poor Obama foreign policy record is the best the mature and experienced adults are capable of, then we may as well give the untested Trump and his team a chance.

Who knows, they may surprise us.

Donald Trump And Nuclear Weapons

WASHINGTON – Casual talk about nuclear weapons and their possible use is not recommended. Likewise, tough remarks about not being outspent by opponents on nuclear weapons procurement and deployments may create anxiety and fears about “arms races” and a path to war within the general public; but they do not amount to a clearly delineated new nuclear strategy.

Modernize U.S. nuclear weapons

I would not try to over interpret general statements made by

President-elect Donald Trump on matters pertaining to the U.S. nuclear arsenal and possible policy changes, as for the moment they are not accompanied by a specific new policy agenda.

That said, here is what President-elect Donald Trump could say and do about the American nuclear arsenal, if his purpose were, as I hope, to reaffirm the long-standing U.S. policy whereby peace is ensured by a robust and always credible American nuclear arsenal that can and will be used in case of an attack.

In a word, nuclear deterrence works only if America demonstrates that it has both the tools, (state of the art nuclear weapons, ready to be launched), and the determination to retaliate, (this is about the ability to convey to all potential enemies that America has and will have the political will to retaliate, under all circumstances, no exceptions).

because of all of the above, President-elect trump could declare that America will continue to invest in the modernization of its nuclear triad (strategic bombers, land based intercontinental ballistic missiles, and ballistic missiles based on submarines). He could justify this policy by arguing that a modern, up to date nuclear arsenal is also a reliable arsenal. (Hence the recent decision made by the Obama administration to finally procure a new generation of strategic bombers in order to replace dangerously old B-52s).

The importance of Command and Control

Furthermore, he could add that, in order to ensure continued reliability of its nuclear forces under any scenarios, the U.S. will continue to invest in all aspects of Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence regarding U.S. nuclear weapons.

This is all about the goal of conveying to our adversaries that America's nuclear deterrent will always be a viable

option in any and all situations. Even under the most catastrophic scenarios, there will always be a surviving, legitimate Commander in Chief in full control of all U.S. nuclear weapons. Even if the President and Vice President and other national security leaders down the chain of command were killed by terror attacks, a legitimate U.S. National Command Authority will always survive, fully prepared to retaliate massively against any aggressor.

Always prepared

So, here is the simple message to any hostile power: Never count on America to be caught unprepared by a surprise attack. Never count on any scenario in which America would surrender without retaliating. Massive retaliation will always be U.S. policy. Therefore, count on the certainty that disastrous losses will be inflicted on any attacker. Swift and devastating “massive retaliation” will always follow any attack against America. Therefore: *“Do not even think about it”*.

Invest in ballistic missile defense

Moreover, a Trump administration should focus on the creation of credible ballistic missile defenses. The U.S. standing policy based on a credible nuclear deterrent and the determination to use it should work against major nuclear powers (think Russia or China) that (supposedly) will always act rationally. But it may not work vis-a-vis an unpredictable nuclear armed North Korea or Iran (should Iran eventually get its own nuclear weapons).

Hence the need to protect America with robust missile defenses capable of intercepting and destroying incoming North Korean nuclear armed missiles before they reach U.S. soil. As odd as this may sound, America at this time has a very limited number of interceptors. They are woefully inadequate to guarantee our security against rogue nuclear powers that

cannot be deterred by the threat of massive retaliation.

Reliable nuclear weapons reinforce stability

Should president Trump announce such policy objectives, they should be interpreted by all observers –domestic and foreign– as reassuring. America will continue to rely on its nuclear deterrent. However, for such a deterrent to be credible, and therefore for nuclear weapons to act as a stabilizing force, it has to be modernized, in order to guarantee its reliability, resilience and survival under any scenarios.

Obsolete weapons create instability

Indeed, although this may not be immediately apparent to the lay person, a neglected, semi-obsolete nuclear arsenal, accompanied by a weak Command and Control system that may break down under severe stress is dangerous and destabilizing. Whereas a state of the art force that is always ready and reliable and always controllable by a legitimate National Command Authority creates stability.

Keep the peace

A robust Command, Control and Communications system, capable of withstanding the shock of a massive surprise attack will guarantee that under any scenarios a competent and fully empowered authority in Washington will always be in total control over America's nuclear forces.

There will be no surprises

The sum total of all these policies regarding the continuous modernization of U.S. nuclear weapons would be to convince any and all adversaries that they should rule out any scenarios under which America may be caught by surprise and therefore not follow through on its promise to retaliate. The U.S. main policy objective here is to convince all enemies that there is no "war winning scenario" against America.

Therefore, when it comes to dealings with an America always armed and ready to retaliate, peace is the best option.

US Public Education In Crisis

WASHINGTON – The international student proficiency scores gathered under the auspices of the Program for International Student Assessment, (also known as PISA), tell us a sad story about the state of U.S. public education. Simply stated, compared to the rest of the developed world, US kids do poorly in math and barely within average in other key subjects. How can America remain the world economic leader in this hyper competitive global knowledge economy, when U.S. school children do not know basic math?

Debates but no action

And please note that this new (and rather depressing) PISA international ranking is not news. Previous PISA scores were very similar. And these mediocre to bad comparative test results come after decades of sometimes heated debates in America focused on the need to drastically improve U.S. public education standards. Which is to say that endless deliberations yielded almost nothing of value.

Indeed the first loud warning about the state of U.S. public education came all the way back in 1983, with the publication of ***“A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform”***. This was a landmark report produced by then President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education.

We are not out of the woods

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* was supposed to be the wake-up call, the strong alarm bell that would force policy makers and civil society organizations to rethink and reorganize public education by improving standards and most of all the quality and preparedness of teachers.

Well, it did not work out that way. More than 30 years later, and notwithstanding good experimentation and some improvements, (think charter schools, for instance), we have yet to see major reforms implemented nationwide.

Hence the depressing performance of US kids in these international PISA scores, year after year.

How bad?

Well, how bad is bad? Here is an account of the PISA results as published in [US News and World Report](#):

“The 2015 Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, study is the latest to document that American students are underperforming their peers in several Asian nations. The U.S. was below the international average in math and about average in science and reading. Singapore was the top performer in all three subjects on the PISA test.

More than half a million 15-year-old students in about 70 nations and educational systems took part in the 2015 exam. The test is coordinated by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, or OECD.

Here are the main things to know about the PISA exams:

Not so encouraging.

The test is based on a 1,000-point scale. Among the findings:

-In math, the U.S. average score was 470, below the

international average of 490. Average scores ranged from 564 in Singapore to 328 in the Dominican Republic.

-In science, the U.S. average score was 496, about the same as the international average of 493. Average scores ranged from 556 in Singapore to 332 in the Dominican Republic”.

U.S. students: bad in math, mediocre in other subjects

So, here is the picture, the U.S. placed number 25 (out of 70) in science; 24 (out of 70) in reading proficiency; and 40 (out of 70) in mathematics.

Here is the conclusion: America is still very much a “Nation at Risk”. It is just amazing and indeed inexcusable that decades of talking about education reform produced at best minimal results. If America were a poor under developed country with no resources, we could understand this under performance. But this is still the richest country on Earth. Given this country’s resources –financial and intellectual– the protracted inability to fix U.S. public education is inexplicable.

Here is the real story

Or may be this anomaly can be explained, after all. U.S. mediocre to bad scores averages hide the fact that in America we have what amounts to a two tier education system. One good and the other bad, or very bad.

Indeed, state of the art schools (mostly private) are available for the children of the elites who, for good money, can buy the best education available. The poor and the minorities (often one of the same) can access only mediocre or failing public schools. Not surprisingly, these under served students do poorly or very poorly in school. Indeed, some of them graduate from high school being functionally semi-illiterate. Some never graduate. If you combine good and very bad schools, the result is low average scores.

The elites are well served

The only conclusion here is that this surprising lack of interest in public education reform and improvements sadly stems from the fact that the children of the elites (the people who in the end make policy) are doing just fine, thank you.

As for all the others who are struggling, their learning conditions and dismal career and life prospects are not a national priority, it seems.

What a shame.

Trump's Remarks On NATO

WASHINGTON – Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump made headlines in Europe when he declared that America would intervene to assist a European NATO under attack only if this ally has paid its full share of the bill for the common defense. This is unprecedented. No U.S. leader or aspiring leader has ever publicly questioned U.S. determination to intervene on behalf of a NATO member in case of hostile actions against it.

NATO's credibility at stake

NATO's credibility rests mostly on the U.S. unconditional commitment to defend Europe. If future U.S. policy indicates that this blanket commitment is subject to conditions, this may encourage aggression, or at least unfriendly actions on the part of Russia, always keen to exploit divisions between the U.S. and its European allies.

Here is what Article 5 of the NATO Treaty says: *The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.* [Emphasis added].

Unconditional pledge

It is clear that the NATO Treaty makes no mention of added conditionalities. It clearly stipulates that an attack against one NATO member shall be considered by all the others as an attack against all. Therefore, technically speaking, Trump's remarks are wrong, and frankly ill-advised. Indeed, Trump's glib remarks about circumstances that he would look at as president before deciding whether or not to come to the help of a European NATO country in peril are most inappropriate. The U.S. is bound to help a fellow NATO member because of a Treaty obligation. There is no gray area.

That said, Trump, while wrong on his interpretation of the Treaty, diplomacy and more, is actually right on substance. Let me explain.

Not paying for the common defense

In his usual inelegant but (sometimes) effective style, Trump pointed out what every U.S. defense official knows but will not say so bluntly, especially in public. It is a well-known fact that Europe is not paying its fair share of the common defense.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, European defense budgets

have been (with very few exceptions) in free fall. The official pledge taken by all NATO countries to invest at least 2% of their GDP on defense has been broken by most of the Alliance members. There is no sign that all or at least most Europeans will soon be in compliance. Again, these are undisputed facts.

U.S. and NATO officials have repeatedly noted (albeit using muffled language) this huge gap between promises and actual defense spending. President Obama himself expressed his distress while contemplating European allies who do not spend even the bare minimum for the common security.

Trump said what most defense officials believe

Given all that, what Trump said is very much in line with what most members of the U.S. national security establishment know and say –but mostly in private meetings. The huge difference is that Trump publicly and bluntly said that America will not come to the rescue of delinquent members. And this is news.

Of course this unprecedented statement by someone who may be the next U.S. Commander in Chief come January 2017 made headlines, especially in the front line NATO countries in Eastern Europe that are directly facing Russia. (Think Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland). By saying to the Europeans something that amounts to *“First pay up, and then we shall see what I can do for you”*, Trump created nervousness and potentially contributed to enhancing instability in Eastern Europe. Given what he said, will Trump’s America come to the rescue of Estonia in case of an attack? May be not. His statement allowed all sorts of bad conjectures. This is why it was most ill-advised.

Pledges should be honored

That said, on the broader issue of lack of a European serious commitment to the common security, Trump is basically right. Throughout its long history that goes back to 1949, NATO has

always been an unequal arrangement, with the U.S. doing the heavy lifting when it comes to defense spending.

But now we are at the point in which many European members of this old security pact contribute little to the common defense, some almost nothing; with the hope that they can get away with routinely unfulfilled pledges. This has to stop. Otherwise this old alliance turns into a joke.

Trump pointed out this huge gap between promises and actions. Again, really wrong on form; but right on substance.

Terrorism Is Not An Existential Threat

WASHINGTON – Sadly, there has been another terror attack. This time it took place in Munich, one of Germany's most important cities. Here is my take on this tragedy. It is alright for the news media to report the facts. What is not alright, in fact down right insane, is for every news channel to provide endless coverage of the event that quickly turns into wild speculation in the absence of hard facts.

Obsessive coverage

Indeed, all the networks kept the topic on the air by creating an endless loop in which there was no real news. The same skimpy facts were repeated again and again, in an obsessive fashion. In an equally obsessive fashion, viewers were treated with endless reruns of the same footage that showed scared people in Munich running away.

Uninformed commentary now part of the news

And it got a lot worse. In order to keep viewers interested, the news editors laced these non-reports from Munich with interviews with “experts” who knew absolutely nothing about the evolving situation in Germany. But supposedly they are “terrorism experts” who can opine on what is going on, even though they are totally in the dark regarding the key facts. As this “coverage” unfolded, nobody knew anything about the Munich shooter. Was he a German? Was he Middle Eastern? Is this about ISIL and jihad? Is this the work of extreme right militants? Or is it about a mentally disturbed person with no political agenda?

Ignorance is OK

But none of this matters. And so you could see on various TV channels a parade of retired U.S. Generals who were asked to offer their (supposedly insightful) opinion about an ongoing police action aimed at capturing a shooter in a German shopping mall about which they knew absolutely nothing. As if their military background would allow them to know what was happening and why.

And then add to the experts mix retired CIA and FBI agents, think tank people, and assorted others. One thing is clear. None of these people knew anything whatsoever about what happened in Munich. But this does not matter. Speculation, sometimes totally irresponsible, by experts is now considered an integral part of news coverage.

And it got really crazy. “Let’s assume that these are ISIL inspired terrorists”, said one. “Well, in this case, this means that...blah, blah, blah”. This is how the news media transformed a sad event whose causes were unknown (and that is very limited in scope) into yet another chapter of an unfolding global war waged by Terror against us that does not exist.

A global war that does not exist

Yes, the media want you to believe that this Munich attack must be part of a general war waged by Islamic fanatics against the West. Another terror attack signals that we are dealing with a ferocious enemy, determined to totally destroy us. And then the really stupid questions follow: *"In your opinion, what should governments do to keep us totally safe?"* As if there were an intelligent, cogent answer to such a broad question.

Terrorism is real

Terrorism is unfortunately real. Yes, innocent people across the world are being killed, and many more are potentially vulnerable. This is true. But by amplifying the news coverage of all these attacks the news media creates the false impression that there are thousands and thousands of terrorists ready to jump on us. They describe all this as an existential, truly overwhelming threat; when it is not.

A total of a few hundred people killed over a few months period across many countries is serious business. But these killings do not amount to an ongoing massive slaughter. By comparison, during WWI thousands of soldiers were killed in just a few hours in one of the many battles that were fought almost daily, over a number of years. Again, thousands of people get killed every year in America by criminals. But, somehow these deaths are not as important.

No perspective

I am not saying that terror-related killings should be ignored because they are not large enough to deserve attention. I am saying however that they should be looked at in perspective. Unless we see a real change in the momentum of these terror operations showing us that there is both willingness and operational ability to attack all Western (and other) countries from all angles on a regular basis, these terror

attacks are not about to destroy our civilization. Of course we should deploy all our intelligence and police resources to deal with this threat. This is serious business. But we should leave its handling to law enforcement agencies and not panic.

World not coming to an end

However, this is not what the media tell us. Indeed, by providing truly over the top, excessive coverage and by allowing the wildest speculations about *“what other terrible things will happen next”* to be mixed with incessant news coverage the media give the public the impression that, on account of “Global Terrorism”, the world may be coming to an end.

This is just not true. Allowing this perception to be created by exaggerated coverage the media are creating fear, if not panic when we need perspective and calm. This is truly irresponsible. This distortion amounts to a huge disservice to Western societies which rely on the news media for balanced accounts in order to gain a reasonably accurate understanding about what is going on in the world.