

Can U.S. Fight Insurgencies?

WASHINGTON – Under pressure, the Obama administration released the estimated number of civilians killed (unintentionally) in the course of U.S. drone strikes that have taken place in various theaters. Along with the figures came new guidance aimed at further reducing “collateral damage”, i.e. the killing of civilians in the course of U.S. air attacks via drones. (These attacks are always aimed at military targets).

Indeed, sometimes, civilians get killed accidentally due to their proximity to military targets. (There have also been a few cases in which civilians have been mistakenly targeted, because it was wrongly assumed, based on the information available at the time, that they were in fact enemy fighters).

Civilians killed by drone attacks

US Intelligence sources stated that 116 civilians were killed in the course of drone strikes aimed at hitting legitimate military targets in different theaters. This usually happens because enemy positions are located in the midst of populated areas.

President Obama stated that America, from now on, will do its very best to further reduce these numbers. Of course, several critics immediately argued that the real number of civilians killed is a lot higher. Besides, this total just announced excludes the death toll from operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

This U.S. announcement could be just public relations; or it could be an oblique way to tell the world that from now on the U.S., while fighting elusive enemies on different fronts, will be more restrained. It will bomb less, with drones or conventional aircraft. Indeed, if this new guidance will take effect as stated, hard to bomb more enemy positions most often located in populated urban areas, when your goal is to further

reduce the chance of killing civilians.

Restrictive Rules of Engagement

Still, whatever the real numbers of civilians accidentally killed, the truth is that America's current "Rules of Engagement" are already extremely restrictive on when and where U.S. bombs can be legitimately used.

Drones strikes are usually planned on the basis of carefully sifted intelligence. "Dynamic" strikes that occur in the context of ongoing military operations however are also subject to complex procedures. Tactical Operations Centers need to authorize them, often only after having received the input of military lawyers who are standing by 24/7 and who are called upon to assess the legality of strikes, on the basis of the available intelligence regarding the situation on the ground.

Is the way to fight a war?

This way of fighting a war looks crazy. But these are the standard rules. Given all these restrictions on what targets can be bombed aimed at avoiding or at least reducing possible civilian casualties, quite often requested strikes are simply not authorized by the U.S. military authorities.

Well, then why do we have non combatants killed by U.S. bombs? Very simple. Al Qaeda, the Taliban and now ISIL do not follow the established laws of warfare. They routinely place their own assets (troops, ammunition, logistics) in the middle of densely populated areas. They deliberately use civilians as human shields. And the purpose of all this is obvious: to deter American attacks.

Civilian deaths become propaganda tools

And when some ISIL positions are indeed attacked and civilians are killed, then there is a huge publicity gain for the

insurgents. *“The blood thirsty Americans bomb indiscriminately, deliberately targeting women and children”.*

Needless to say, ISIL and others have a vested interest in inflating the numbers of civilians killed through drone or other U.S. air strikes. This is their own way of fighting the propaganda war, using the argument of American barbarity in order to recruit more people willing to fight and die for the cause.

Impossible to avoid civilian casualties

The fact is that, even with heroic efforts, it is impossible to avoid civilian casualties while fighting irregular forces that hide within populated areas. It is just impossible. Even with highly sophisticated satellites and other sensors that gather detailed images and provide real time data to those who operate drones, or to pilots of manned aircraft, it is just impossible for the U.S. military to neatly separate combatants who usually wear no uniforms from innocent civilians in populated areas.

No way to win

So, here is the bottom line. If Obama is serious about cutting the number of casualties going forward, then this means that America cannot realistically fight aggressively and win against insurgents who routinely hide in urban areas. Even today, without new restrictions in place on the use of air power, the effort to minimize collateral damage means relatively few air strikes, because many targets are deemed to be unlawful by the military lawyers, and therefore excluded.

More targets will be declared off-limits

If America wants to further diminish the likelihood of future civilian casualties while fighting insurgents, this means that an even larger number of possible military targets will be declared off-limits by the military lawyers, due to their

close proximity to civilian areas.

And here is the absurdity. This is no way to fight any war. As troubling as this is to our civilized conscience, it is just impossible to fight an insurgency that operates in cities and towns without causing some unwanted suffering.

If America wants to win against ISIL and other insurgents, it has to accept this fact: if you want to destroy enemy forces that hide in populated areas, you have to accept that civilians will also be killed.

Long, inconclusive conflicts

Otherwise, if avoiding civilian casualties is more important than destroying at least some enemy targets, let's prepare for an endless and inconclusive conflict with adversaries who do not play by the accepted rules of war.

With all the restrictions outlined above, and possibly more to come, the U.S. cannot fight properly; because Washington feels the pressure of a world public opinion that requires America to behave according to an impossible standard.

Orlando Shooting Strengthens Trump's Position On Muslims

WASHINGTON – In a U.S. presidential campaign that is and will be dominated by emotional slogans and over simplified narratives, the horrible Orlando shooting (50 people killed, 53 injured) by the son of Afghan immigrants will be used by Donald Trump as clear evidence that his tough anti-Muslim and anti-immigrants positions are the only way to protect American

lives from the supreme existential threat of Islamic terrorism.

Muslim killer?

This killing rampage (the worst in U.S. history) planned and executed by Omar Mateen, 29, will be used as a powerful argument to severely restrict immigration, ban refugees from the Middle East, place a hold on all would be visitors/immigrants of Muslim faith, and redouble U.S. military efforts against ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

This sounds absurd. However horrible, this is only one episode, orchestrated it seems by just one person. No, America is not facing armies of domestic Islamic terrorists. But in this political climate, for almost half of America, this is not over reaction. This sounds logical and rational. And you can bet that this is the argument that will be made. And you can also bet that Donald Trump will lead this charge, with the clear expectation that his anti-Muslim policies will help him get to the White House.

We are at war

Here is the "truth" according to the Trump/anti-immigrant camp. As we all know, a large part of the Muslim world is at war with us. We are the innocent targets and victims. The violent acts perpetrated on U.S. soil against Americans by Muslims, including Muslims born in the U.S. who became radicals as young adults, is evidence that we are facing a mortal danger and that the U.S. Government (led as we know by weak and incompetent Democrats who simply do not want to acknowledge that Islamic Terrorism declared war on us) is not doing enough to protect the American people against a mounting terror threat.

To those who argue that these scattered violent episodes –however gruesome– do not constitute evidence of a massive, ongoing campaign to kill Americans, the anti-immigrants reply

forcefully that this is just the beginning. They “know” that there are hundreds, possibly thousands of would-be terrorists warming up and getting ready to unleash their vicious attacks against innocent Americans.

We need to protect ourselves

As I said, this is a presidential campaign that is and will be dominated by over simplifications and raw emotions. Forget about balanced and nuanced positions. If most Americans buy the idea that “the terrorists are already among us and are ready to kill us all” and that for this very reason we need drastic measures to protect our lives, then Donald Trump gains a powerful edge in this unfolding race for the White House.

He is the Tough Guy who will have the courage to take the drastic steps that will finally get us protection from this looming terror threat. He will do his very best to paint Hillary Clinton and the entire Democratic establishment as weak on terrorism and national defense and therefore unfit to govern America.

We need a determined leader

And the Tough Guy will propose tough responses. If this includes undertaking measures that may infringe on the civil rights of law-abiding, innocent Muslims who have nothing to do with terror plots, so be it. Better safe than sorry. They are Muslims, and therefore by definition suspects. The priority here is to protect Americans.

Voice of reason?

Hillary Clinton will try to be the balanced voice of reason. But this presidential campaign has nothing to do with reason. And fear of terrorism is the quintessential emotional issue. It is mostly about fear of unknown dangers that are easily magnified by those who want you to believe that this is the number one existential threat confronting all of us.

Those who support Donald Trump believe that in this hour of supreme danger only a New Leader, not tainted by the corrupt ways of Washington, DC, will create a new era of security, self-confidence, prosperity and eventually regained national prestige.

Are these the feelings of the majority of Americans? In a few months we shall find out.

NATO Is Indeed Obsolete

WASHINGTON – The Atlantic Alliance, or NATO, is an old security arrangement (founded in 1949) that no longer has a clear purpose. In his habitual blunt style Donald Trump, the leading candidate for the Republican nomination in the upcoming presidential elections, recently said that NATO “is obsolete”. In fact, while Trump is certainly not a leading foreign and defense policy expert, he is mostly right.

No mission

Indeed, what is NATO’s mission today? And, related to that, what means does NATO have at its disposal to execute this mission? On the first question, now that the Soviet Union is gone, the mission of a military alliance created to face it is murky. On the second question, NATO has very few military means, as defense budgets in most members states have been shrinking, year after year. (In the US, despite cuts, the Pentagon’s budget is equal to 3.6% of GDP. Germany’s defense spending is 1.2% of GDP. In Belgium it is 0.9%, in Spain 0.9%, in Italy 1.0%)

The old rationale

The initial rationale for the creation of Atlantic Alliance, the very first peace time integrated military structure, was the Soviet threat against Western Europe at the beginning of the Cold War. Europe's proximity to the expanded Soviet Bloc, (it included all of Eastern Europe and East Germany), combined with Europe's economic and military weakness, (due to the lingering effects of the destruction caused by WWII), prompted America to commit itself to the defense of Europe. Hence the creation of NATO in 1949, with tens of thousands of US troops permanently stationed in West Germany and elsewhere in Europe, with tanks, guns, aircraft, and nuclear weapons.

No more Soviet Union

But then the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, and the Cold War ended because the Soviet Union imploded shortly thereafter. The Warsaw Pact disappeared. The New Russian Federation lost control over all of Eastern Europe. Germany was reunified. Moscow also lost large pieces of the old Soviet Union, including Ukraine, Belarus and the three Baltic States.

NATO is still here

However, NATO was not disbanded in response to the withering away of the old existential threat to Europe's security. Perhaps it was prudent to keep the old institution in place, just in case. And may be it was a good idea to allow the former members of the Soviet Bloc to join NATO, even though the new Russian leaders saw this as an eastward expansion of NATO, and therefore a potential threat to them.

Still, be that as it may, an Alliance's strength is based not on how many members it has, (28 countries), but on its shared purpose and on its ability to deploy the military tools to secure them. And here NATO shows its inherent weakness. No clear purpose, and drastically reduced military forces.

A new threat from Russia?

If we fast forward to today, many will argue that NATO is still quite relevant because Putin's Russia has demonstrated to have aggressive tendencies. In 2008 it went to war with Georgia. More recently it grabbed Crimea, a piece of Ukraine. Many say that, if unchecked by NATO, Russia would keep moving westward into Poland, the Baltic States, and may be beyond.

I believe that Russia is mostly interested in neighboring regions that historically were part of Russia. The idea that Ukraine is just the appetizer for a famished Russia, while Portugal or at the very least Germany will be the pudding seems quite preposterous.

Inadequate military means

But even if we assume that this unlikely theory of Russian resurgent expansionism were in fact correct, then where is NATO's demonstrable military deterrent to counter it?

Indeed, if NATO is still standing and operational because Russia is a threat to its members, then we should also see robust defense spending aimed at creating a war fighting force that can credibly deter aggression by showing Russia that any threat to NATO members' security would be met by a formidable force.

Unfulfilled commitments

Well, it is not so. Because of economic weaknesses and competing social spending priorities, most European countries have allowed defense spending to go into free fall. In theory, all NATO members are unequivocally committed to spend at least 2% of GDP on defense. In practice, only 5 countries, out of 28 NATO members, have honored this pledge. Most of the others spend around 1% of GDP on their military, or less. This is half of what they promised. If you take the U.S. out, The European members of NATO have only limited air power. Practically no sizable expeditionary forces. No meaningful airlift capabilities.

During the Libya mission, confronted with a third-rate enemy, the French and British air forces run out of smart bombs only a few weeks into the conflict. Even that limited operation could not have been executed without US support in key areas such as air defense jamming and suppression, and overall logistics.

Not serious

Quite frankly, this reluctance to field credible military forces makes NATO into a joke. You cannot say that we have to keep NATO together and strong in order to face an aggressive Russia and then have a virtually disarmed military alliance on account of the fact that nobody wants to spend diminished revenue on defense in economically weak countries.

Limited support to US-led operations

As far as what used to be called "out of area" (that is possible threats outside of Europe) NATO does not have clear objectives and a credible strategy to achieve them. Yes, NATO countries participated in the difficult Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. NATO countries intervened in Libya. All true. But in all these efforts (Libya is a partial exception) the US was leading, and selected NATO countries followed.

At present, while the US (with little enthusiasm) is leading a military effort against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, some NATO countries are contributing some aircraft to the air war. But there is no clear NATO policy. And certainly no commitment by all NATO members to participate.

No clear purpose

So, here is the thing. With the end of the Cold War, NATO lost its original purpose. What we have now is murky strategic objectives and lack of military means to accomplish even slightly ambitious missions.

The NATO Alliance is now mostly a talking shop with too many members who contribute almost nothing of value. While something may change after the US elections, it is unlikely that anybody will ask the hard questions about purpose, strategy and means.

No debate on difficult issues

Nobody wants to have an open debate within NATO that would inevitably expose deep political divisions and embarrassing military vulnerabilities. For this reason, I suspect that the old institutional framework will be left as is, even though most analysts recognize that it is obsolete and virtually meaningless when it comes to core military capabilities.

In the future, if we are lucky, the US may be able to create *ad hoc* “coalitions of the willing” and work selectively with the 4 or 5 NATO countries that still have modern armed forces.

Afghanistan Among The Most Corrupt Countries In The World

WASHINGTON – Remember Afghanistan? Yes, that sorry nation in Asia, sandwiched between Iran and Pakistan. Presidential candidate Barack Obama, back in 2008, described it as the country where America should have concentrated all its military efforts, instead of starting a new “bad war” in Iraq.

War of necessity?

Well, now Afghanistan enjoys the dubious distinction of being one of the most corrupt countries in the world, according to

Transparency International. Billions of foreign aid money, (most of it from the US), combined with poorly targeted military and security assistance funds, (sometimes untraceable), certainly contributed to this.

After he got elected, Obama called Afghanistan a “war of necessity”, as opposed to a “war of choice” like Iraq. We “had” to fight there, because, according to him, that was a just cause. Al Qaeda had its bases there. That’s where they plotted the 9/11 attacks.

Anyway, fast forward to today and Afghanistan, “just war” or nor, is essentially a disaster area. Sure, the US and its tired NATO allies have cut back their military forces deployed there. But only after having created strong and self-sustaining institutions, we are told.

Leaving the country in good hands?

The idea is that the well-trained Afghan soldiers, (yes there is irony here), will soon be able to take care of Afghanistan’s security entirely on their own. Indeed, after billions and billions of dollars spent in Afghanistan, America can leave the country (although not entirely) with a high degree of confidence that there is a democratically elected government in Kabul that can rely on (US and NATO trained) loyal and efficient armed forces in its continuing fight against the ever resilient Taliban.

One of the most corrupt countries in the world

Yes, if it only were so. Afghanistan is an unmitigated disaster. No real economy, except for opium production. The Afghan forces fight, sometimes well, sometimes not so well. But the Taliban threat has not receded. And, guess what, there are astronomic levels of corruption that, for sure, involve the NATO trained military and the police, among others.

At least some Afghans are aghast. According to Tolo, an Afghan

news site, "A new annual study of Transparency International illustrates Afghanistan, Somalia and North Korea as the most corrupt countries among 176 in the world".

"Afghanistan is the second most corrupt country in the list of 176 countries ranked in the report" Tolo continues. "Meanwhile, Executive Director for Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA) Mohammad Ikram Afzali is concerned over the Afghan government's anti-corruption campaign and recommended a number of changes to this drive".

"The fight against corruption should be the top priority of the National Unity Government [NUG]. There should be a political will for this purpose," he said.

"The NUG has not implemented its promises it has made for overcoming the endemic corruption in the country," said Nasir Temori, a researcher at the IWA.

The Chief Executive of the NUG, Abdullah Abdullah, in a session with UN and other humanitarian organizations said they are committed to fighting endemic corruption.

"There is no doubt in the NUG's mind it is serious about the fight against corruption in public offices," he said.

The NUG leaders in the first day in their office vowed to overcome corruption in government offices and bring transparency in government contracts and other processes that pave the way for this problem. [Bold added]

"Not only government but the people, the civil society and the private sector are responsible to join hands and fight corruption in the country," said the president's deputy spokesman Sayed Zafar Hashemi."

It did not happen

Well, whatever the National Unity Government pledged about fighting corruption, it simply did not happen. Trying to help,

the US and other countries poured literally billions and billions of dollars into Afghanistan in an effort to modernize its institutions and its economy, and there are only negligible results. And this is in part because a massive amount of foreign aid money was stolen through corruption, embezzlement, and other illegal means.

Bad aid policies

To make things worse, corruption aside, US official aid was often spent on stupid or insane projects. Recently the news came up of a compressed natural gas (CNG) refueling station, funded by the Pentagon, that ended up costing in excess of \$ 40 million. Yes that \$ 40 million for a refueling station, when comparable projects in neighboring Pakistan would cost no more than \$ 500,000.

Did this 140 times cost overrun happen just because of an extravagant level of stupidity and incompetence? May be we shall never know. The US run Task Force in charge of this insanely wasteful project cannot provide proper documentation.

And this an American project. This was not run by the Afghans. While this example is truly egregious, if this level of mismanagement is even remotely indicative of how things were planned and organized under the "just war" umbrella, you can understand why Afghanistan is an utter US foreign and security policies failure.

Interestingly enough, nobody says anything about any of this in Washington. It is true that President Obama inherited the Afghan conflict from George W. Bush who started it in 2001. However, after almost 8 years in the White House, he owns it. And yet it seems that he is not held accountable.

A disaster

Sadly, the Afghan "just war" turned into a chronically ill patient completely unable to get better and take care of

himself. In the meantime, everybody, from the ruling elites to the policemen in the villages, is busy stealing and extorting.

Is there a "Plan B" for Afghanistan? I doubt it.

Obama Talks About Gun Violence In Order To Avoid Embarrassing Issues

WASHINGTON – I've got to hand it to President Obama. He is a really capable politician. And probably the greatest skill a politician can display is the ability to force Americans to focus on what he wants them to, as opposed to other important issues that could potentially damage him or his party.

Gun control initiative

On January 5 President Obama made a major White House announcement about new measures that should prevent wanted criminals, or people with felony records from legally buying guns. On close inspection, this initiative amounts to almost nothing.

Obviously this is not a new legislative proposal. This would require congressional approval. And there is no chance that the Republican majority would vote for any new measures. And it is not an executive order either. This could have more teeth; but it could be challenged in court.

Obama's announcement is about new "guidance" on how to interpret and properly follow existing laws and regulations, while devoting more resources to process background checks on would-be gun buyers more rapidly. These directives will also instruct people in the gun selling business on how to properly adhere to existing regulations. In other words, this is virtually nothing.

No impact

Indeed, even assuming faithful adherence to this new guidance, the impact would be negligible at best. If you are not convinced, please consider that there are already in excess of 300 million guns –yes this is 300 million– in circulation in the US. This is a staggering amount. New rules that may restrict access for some future gun buyers, however well intentioned, will not change this underlying reality. Plenty of guns in America.

News of the day

And yet, notwithstanding the triviality of all this, Obama's White House announcement completely dominated the news cycle. There was full live TV coverage of the event, followed by almost mandatory commentaries in which gun violence experts were called upon to opine on what will be the impact, if any, of these new measures. They were followed by NGOs representatives who spoke in favor or against guns. And then, of course, each and every Republican and Democratic presidential candidate had to be given a chance to comment on what Obama had said.

Diversion

All this amounts to yet another instance of masterful media manipulation. Obama dominated the news. As a result of this gun control diversion, there has been almost no coverage of other really important issues that would deserve real analysis and scrutiny.

But why the diversion? Because going deep into these other matters would expose America's weaknesses and Obama's lack of leadership. Therefore, if we can, let's create a diversion. Let's talk about something else.

"Hey, how about another "non-initiative" about gun control? We know that this is a crowd pleaser. The Democratic "base" loves it. OK, let's do it".

Nothing about China

And so it went. As we were watching Obama, no coverage of the disturbing news from China. Yes, there are nasty economic tremors in China. It is quite possible that, if China is sick and the whole world catches a bit of this Asian flu, the already fragile US economy may go south. This would be bad news for Democrats at the beginning of a critical election year.

Saudi Arabia-Iran crisis forgotten

Likewise, no coverage of the additional crisis in the Persian Gulf in the aftermath of the public execution of Nemer al-Nemer, a Shiite cleric, by the Saudi government. Saudi Arabia, along with its smaller Arab Gulf allies, cut relations with Iran after an Iranian mob (the Iranians are all Shiites) burnt down the Saudi Embassy in Tehran as a reaction to the execution.

Could this new major friction between traditional religious and political foes escalate to violence? What about the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf? Should Americans worry about this? Has the administration any contingency plans?

Add to this Saudi-Iran spat Iranian open defiance of UN Security Council Resolutions when it comes to its ongoing ballistic missile program. The Iranians proclaim that they can do whatever they want with their missile programs. Well, does this defiance impact in any way the implementation of the

separate but related nuclear deal that Obama rated as a major US diplomatic accomplishment aimed at preserving peace in the region and beyond?

US policy towards Afghanistan?

Last but not least, here is another unpleasant topic drowned by the gun safety initiative: US soldiers keep getting killed in hopelessly messy Afghanistan.

Discussing this matter would invite scrutiny on the fundamentals of US policy towards Afghanistan. What is the end game? Are we making progress? Can we defeat the Taliban? Can we confidently leave the country with the expectation that the fragile Kabul government will keep things under control after we are gone?

We do not discuss real issues

So, you get the picture.

The world economy is on shaky ground. Nervous investors from Japan to New York are looking for any additional deterioration in China as a sign that it is time to run for the exit.

The Middle East is one step away from another crisis to be added to Syria, Iraq, and ISIL.

The US-Iran deal is potentially in jeopardy because of Tehran's behavior.

Obama's Afghanistan policy is looking bad.

And what does Obama do? He delivers a "hot air" White House address on how to cut gun violence focused on minor initiatives that will change nothing. I cannot blame him for trying. This is politics after all.

All US media accepted diversion as real news

But what is shameful is that the entire US national media

establishment bought the diversion. All the networks and cable TV news shows felt obliged to cover in detail this non event, at the same time adding layers and layers of irrelevant commentary.

And so, this became the news of the day, with more ripples to follow.

Obama knew what he was doing

But here is the thing. Obama knew exactly what he was doing: a diversion. Whereas the media is apparently unable to call this presidential theater for what it is: a masquerade. News programs could have mentioned (in 20 seconds) Obama's initiative, and then they should have focused on the real issues: the world economy, international security. But it did not go this way.

Therefore, instead of talking about the US economy and the new Saudi Arabia-Iran crisis –real issues with possible grave consequences– we debate the merit of yet another presidential gun control initiative that according to most experts will change absolutely nothing.

The US media should know better.

Sargent Bowe Bergdahl Charged With Desertion

WASHINGTON – Remember Sargent Bowe Bergdahl, the soldier who had been a Taliban prisoner for 5 years and then was freed in 2014 in exchange for 5 Taliban officials held by the US at Guantanamo Bay? Right at the time of the exchange, the Obama

administration presented this prisoners' swap as some kind of victory.

Desertion charge

Well, today we learn that Sargent Bergdhal, after a lengthy investigation on the circumstances of his disappearance from his base in Afghanistan, and subsequent capture by the Taliban in 2009, will be tried for desertion by a US Court Martial.

War hero?

Come again? The war hero was probably a deserter? And the Obama administration did not know about this? Well, apparently not. We were told at the time that the American government secretly negotiated the release of one of our brave soldiers. *"Yes, it was complicated. But we did it. We take care of our own"*.

In fact, President Obama was so proud of this achievement that he made a public White House announcement of the prisoners' exchange, with Bergdhal's parents next to him.

Administration could not control the story

But then, after the White House "good news" announcement, something started moving in a bad direction. Other soldiers who had served with Bergdhal in Afghanistan said in various interviews that he had voluntarily left his post, without any authorization.

In other words, in their view, Bergdhal was in fact a deserter who was later on captured by the Taliban.

"Honor and distinction"?

Well, that did not fit the narrative of the brave soldier who suffered in captivity and was later on rescued by a provident US government. And so the administration tried to change the picture.

They dispatched National Security Adviser Susan Rice to appear on TV shows where the poor lady had to say that Bergdhal served his country "with honor and distinction".

But the stories of Bergdhal's probable desertion did not go away. Of course, this made Susan Rice look foolish, or worse. In the end, the administration could not fix this public relations debacle. In the meantime, the Army was left with the Bergdhal hot potato. They did not know what to do with him. They gave him a desk job somewhere.

Investigation

Still, given all the controversy, shouldn't the bizarre circumstances of his disappearance from his post in Afghanistan be investigated? Well, may be. But it took months for any investigation to get going. And then this thing dragged on and on.

In hindsight, it is obvious that the White House wanted to create as much distance as possible between the Obama-announced release and the final fate of this soldier.

Finally, only now, we are getting somewhere. Bergdhal will be tried by a US Court Martial on charges of desertion.

Hero, or deserter?

Of course, this being America, a charge does not equal to a conviction. But we are talking about a potential deserter who was portrayed by the President of the United States, and by the White House National Security Adviser as a war hero who had been liberated thanks to the relentless efforts of this administration, after 5 long years of captivity.

A story of incompetence

If you think about it, this Bergdhal story illustrates an incredible degree of incompetence and superficiality. Nobody checked the records. Nobody did any homework about Bergdhal

and about how he left his post in Afghanistan.

They allowed the President of the United States to embarrass himself with the public announcement of “a war hero finally coming home”. They forced Susan Rice to say on TV something that was clearly not true about Bergdhal having served with honor and distinction.

Nobody wants to connect the dots

Having said all this, what is truly surprising, in fact alarming, is that today, after the official announcement of the Court Martial proceedings about to begin, nobody is connecting the dots. Nobody is going back to how this story was initially presented. Nobody wants to point out the obvious fact that this whole prisoners’ exchange operation was mismanaged. Now, it looks like an unsupervised Junior High School Project that went terribly wrong.

No accountability

For some reason the media just do not want to say that this administration did all this, all by itself. Talk about unforced errors!

Still, for some reason, the context of Bergdhal’s disappearance, capture by the Taliban, and eventual release following the prisoners’ swap has been forgotten.

This is a bad sign. Indeed, the first sign of a declining republic is when we forget to hold our public officials accountable.

Mentally disturbed

As for Sargent Bergdhal, everything we heard about him indicates that he is mentally disturbed. Most likely at the time of his (alleged) desertion he had no treasonous motives. He did something stupid, inspired by stupid fantasies.

Still, whatever his mental state then and now, what he probably did is called desertion. And, no, this behavior is not an indication of a soldier who served America with honor and distinction.

Lessons of 9/11: Stay Vigilant, Improve US Intelligence

WASHINGTON – The 9/11 attacks brought home the simple but unpleasant truth that America and Americans are easy, vulnerable targets for terror attacks. The 9/11 aftermath also brought home that this nasty “asymmetric conflict” cannot be won. At least it cannot be won the way we normally understand the dynamics of “normal” conflicts. In a “regular war” at some point one side gives up. It stops fighting. By doing so, it concedes defeat.

No end to this conflict

Unfortunately, when it comes to *jihad*, there will be no decisive battle, followed by an orderly surrender. Islamic terrorism, with sporadic or frequent attacks, will continue. As long as there will be enough believers convinced that it is their sacred duty to attack America, (and other Western and Muslim countries), in order to fulfill their religious obligation as jihadists, this conflict will go on and on.

Here is a key point to keep in mind. The incentives to join Islamic militant organizations that routinely use terror as a means to fight their Holy War are totally irrational, and therefore they cannot be easily countered through smart

counter moves.

Irrational motivations for an irrational conflict

So, here is the thing. We are facing a small but nasty transnational enemy willing to do crazy stuff in order to achieve what any rational person would call impossible goals. The objectives of establishing true Islamic orthodoxy and/or recreating a Caliphate are in fact dreams. The trouble is that, as long as various Islamic radical organizations, connected or unconnected, hierarchical or dispersed, professional or amateurish, continue to believe in these dreams the Islamic terror problem will not go away.

US response to 9/11

That said, if we look at the early US responses to 9/11 with the benefit of hindsight, we see a fantastic misallocation of resources. If you are dealing with a rat infestation, you do not fight it with tanks and bombers. You better use other, more targeted, counter measures.

“War on Terror”?

The first and probably biggest mistake made by the Bush administration was to label the American response to 9/11 a “War on Terror”. This mislabelling allowed the general public to believe that this was in fact a regular conflict. As Americans were told that Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda followers were hiding in Afghanistan, then it seemed logical that we would send ground troops to get them where they were holed up. Well, this worked, but only in part. Yes, al Qaeda and the Taliban were chased out of Afghanistan. But they regrouped, in Pakistan and elsewhere. When favorable conditions returned, the Taliban came back.

The Iraq blunder

Later on, based on truly bad intelligence about WMDs, America

invaded Iraq. The invasion was a bad mistake. And this was only the beginning of the Iraq tragedy. The military occupation was entrusted to amateurs who knew nothing and botched almost everything. Fast forward to today, and we have a semi-destroyed and now hopelessly divided country.

Yes, we got rid of Saddam Hussein, unquestionably a bad guy. But we could not control subsequent developments. We could not prevent a major Sunni-Shia civil war. We could not prevent al Qaeda in Iraq from making gains. And finally, by withdrawing all US forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, we created a space for ISIS (or ISIL) to step in from its base in Syria, and occupy most regions where Iraqi Sunnis live.

What a mess! And, yes, America created this mess. And why did this happen? The Iraq invasion was ordered because of bad intelligence, and because of stupid ideas about creating an island of democracy and western-style modernity in the heart of the Middle East.

Counter insurgency versus counter terrorism

In Afghanistan, America made the critical mistake of adopting counter insurgency tactics to fight against small, dispersed radical Taliban groups. This meant deploying large units to find and engage an elusive enemy.

To fight terror groups, America needs to develop counter terror capabilities. And good counter terror is mostly about good intelligence. Without good intelligence we shall keep chasing the bad guys for ever. If you do not know where your target is, nothing else matters. (Think of the operation to get and kill Osama bin Laden. 90% of it was good intelligence). Every now and then you can have a lucky break; but this is no strategy.

Transforming Afghanistan?

Besides, the eventual success of the Afghan operation was

predicated on transforming this truly medieval country via modernization. The popular theory was that, as long as young Afghans could see that they could have a good place in a legitimate country that would offer them education and economic opportunity, the appeal of the Taliban would eventually recede.

Failure

All in all, the strategy to prevail in this nasty, asymmetric conflict was totally flawed. America wanted to clean up Afghanistan and it failed to do so. It wanted to “drain the swamp” in which terrorists hide, and it failed to do so. It wanted to import democracy into Iraq, and it failed to do so.

These were not bad objectives as a matter of principle. They were bad ideas because of the impossible mismatch between grandiose goals and limited resources.

Insufficient resources

Indeed, America may be rich; but not that rich. The US never had the means, the funds and the time to make any of this happen. In a fantasy world, if we assume unlimited budgets, unlimited man power, unlimited technical assistance, and unlimited time, we can think about a successful modernization strategy for Afghanistan. But none of these preconditions ever existed. Therefore, the plan was a fantasy.

Going forward

Well, so much for what happened. Going forward, how do we deal with armed radical groups willing to use terrorism?

I'm afraid there is no silver bullet. We cannot control the appeal of *jihadist* ideology. And we cannot identify and destroy –once and for all– all violent Islamic movements. There are too many of them. They operate in secrecy.

Better intelligence

The only tool is improved intelligence. Of course, this is very difficult. We are talking about identifying and infiltrating various organizations in order to dismantle them.

Again, as disappointing as this may sound, there is no silver bullet. As I said at the beginning, we really do not know how to prevent delusional young people from joining *jihadist* movements. We can hope that the appeal of radical ideologies at some point will wear out. History tells us that nothing is “for ever” in this world.

Stay awake

But until this happens, we have to get adjusted to the reality of living under a constant, moderate to severe threat. The intensity of the threat and the lethality of the attacks will vary. With improved intelligence, we can and should get better at catching the bad guys before they strike. But nobody can guarantee 100% success.

That said, it is encouraging that President Obama decided to commemorate the 9/11 tragedy at Fort Meade, Maryland. The choice of venue is no accident. Fort Meade is one of the key centers of US military intelligence. It hosts the National Security Agency, the Defense Information Systems Agency and the United States Cyber Command. While imperfect, these are powerful tools for gathering and analyzing intelligence about radical Islamic groups. These are America’s electronic eyes and ears. Let’s hope that they get better –every day.

The War On Terror And Its Consequences

WASHINGTON – In a thoughtful piece in the NYT, (*The Gift That Keeps Giving*, December 3, 2014), Tom Friedman takes us back to the beginnings of the “War on Terror”, and to how this one single issue totally dominated US foreign and security policies during the 8 years of George W. Bush, while it has also affected the Obama presidency, in as much as the new president tried to distance his administration from the Bush approach, (with mixed results).

After 9/11

In hindsight, now we know what happened. Surprised and shocked by the 9/11 attacks, Washington engineered –from scratch– a new security policy labeled “War on Terror”. Launched in this major endeavor, America overdid almost everything, without in the end achieving its objective of destroying all terrorist organizations around the globe.

Profound disconnect

Now we know that the problem is in a profound disconnect between the nature of the “asymmetric” threat –small groups scattered in various countries that are potentially capable of spectacular acts of terror– and the means used to fight it –the invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq, coupled with horrendously costly efforts aimed at totally rebuilding these societies, so that democratic institutions would inoculate them against religious fanaticism.

Of course, after having suffered the unprecedented 9/11 blows, it was perfectly alright to go after al Qaeda and its supporters, argues Friedman. But what was not alright was the disproportionate response.

Counter terror yes, invasions no

One thing is to organize counter terror missions, quite another to launch the occupation of entire countries, with all the fantastic costs associated with any attempt to modernize their institutions and their economies.

Unfortunately, it gets worse. By focusing on the “War on Terror”, the Bush administration could not deal with anything else. Indeed, by devoting most resources to this conflict, the US government did not do much to make the American economy stronger and more resilient. In the end, we over invested in “Mission Impossible” –building democracies in the Middle East– and we starved America.

We could not do anything else

The main unintended consequence of the “War on Terror ” has been far less money spent on research, on education, and infrastructure in America. If you combine this misallocation of scarce resources with the horrible impact of the 2008 financial crisis, in the end, after the long “War on Terror”, America is not that much more secure, while its economy and society are far less resilient.

More of the same in Afghanistan

And the Obama presidency, while trying to separate itself from Bush’s “all out” approach, to some extent continued along the same lines.

While Obama decided to close the Iraq chapter, (now re-opened), it continued, in fact beefed up, the old (and failed) counter-insurgency approach in Afghanistan, even though counter-insurgency could not possibly succeed, unless we postulate unlimited economic resources, and large numbers of US troops stationed there in Afghanistan, literally for decades.

We need good intelligence

Of course, terrorism is still a nasty enemy. And, after 9/11 no president wants to be caught off guard by yet another major attack.

But the problem with fighting terrorism is that what we need is mostly extremely good intelligence –and we do not have enough of it.

Gigantic and horribly expensive military expeditions, followed by lengthy and even more expensive occupations, are just the wrong tools to combat and defeat dispersed small cells that come up and disappear with relative ease.

Irrational fears

Having said all that, even a few acts of terror get an enormous echo: think about the handful of homemade American jihadists who have recently attacked and killed people. The media demand action that will keep all US citizens safe, as if it were indeed possible to monitor, (or lock-up), each and every extremist or deranged copycat who may at some point do something really nasty.

And here is the problem. In our society we readily accept the very real risk of being killed in a car accident every time we get into an automobile. But, somehow, the extremely remote risk of becoming the victim of an act of terror is considered totally unacceptable.

Therefore we demand that the government will do anything in its powers, (and more), to prevent (extremely rare) acts of terror from happening.

Policy-makers forced to do more

This is illogical. Nonetheless, policy-makers are requested by an anxious public to shape a coherent, reassuring and bullet-proof public policy in order to face any and all possible

terror attacks.

This is impossible. Still, policy-makers need to show that they are really busy working on strategies that will solve the problem. And so they tend to err on the side of overdoing, and this includes over spending.

In the meantime, we still do not take care of our schools, and of our decaying infrastructure.

With An Unresolved Election, Things Are Getting Worse In Afghanistan

WASHINGTON – The Obama “*Afghanistan exit strategy*” was based on two major assumptions. **Number 1:** The US and its NATO allies have done a good job at training Afghan forces –both the military and the police. A modernized and well equipped Afghan army will be perfectly capable of handling the persistent Taliban threat on their own. **Number 2:** Thanks to generous US and allied assistance, there is now in place a reasonably well-functioning government in Kabul whose legitimacy and authority is recognized throughout Afghanistan.

Foundations not so strong

In reality these strong foundations that justify an eventual US and NATO forces withdrawal may not be so strong after all. On the security side, the Taliban seem capable of launching major attacks here in there, including the most spectacular destruction of dozens of trucks carrying precious fuel into

Afghanistan, almost with impunity. *Given all this, it remains to be seen how well the Afghans forces will do after 2016, when they will know that they are really on their own, with no readily available back-up.*

The presidential elections

But the real problem –in fact unprecedented crisis– right now is the legitimacy of any new Kabul government. At the beginning of the recent presidential elections, leading to the runoff between Abdullah Abdullah, (former Foreign Minister), and Ashraf Ghani, (former Finance Minister), it seemed that things were working out reasonably well. The main problem seemed to be security at the polling stations. But, all in all, the Taliban, despite threats and a few attacks, was unable to disrupt the elections.

Fraud

That said, leave it to the Afghans to spice things up. After the first round of voting, Northern Alliance favorite Abdullah was leading by a good margin. He got 45% of the vote, while Ghani received only 31%. And it seemed that Abdullah's chances to win in the second round had improved significantly when the number 3 candidate who had received 11% withdrew from the race and endorsed him.

But now, it looks as if a miracle happened. Ghani jumped from 31% in the first round to 56.4% in the second round. That's almost double what he got the first time. In some precincts his support increased 10 times!

Abdullah got only 43.6%, a little less than what he had received in the first round. Of course, this incredible jump favoring Ghani is due to widespread fraud. What else can it be?

In any other normal democracy, this could not happen. This spectacular increase in the number of Ghani supporters –all in

matter of a few weeks— is not believable. The problem is that this is not a developed democracy. This is Afghanistan.

Constitutional crisis

And therefore now we have an unprecedented constitutional/political mess that may turn really ugly. Of course Abdullah claims that there was widespread fraud, and that he is the legitimate winner. But Ghani is not conceding anything.

So far, things are in limbo. The election results have not been certified. There are plans to have a vote recount. But it is not clear how extensive and how believable such a recount will be.

Still, if there is no acceptable resolution, and if Abdullah goes ahead with a threat he made and sets up a parallel government in case Ghani is declared to be the winner, then we may have the preconditions for civil war. A civil war featuring Abdullah and his Northern Alliance supporters on one side, (mostly Tajik and other non Pashtun), fighting against Ghani and his mostly Pashtun supporters on the other.

Well, here we go. If you thought that the persistent Taliban threat would be the main security issue confronting the Kabul government in the years ahead, brace yourself.

This is a lot worse. It turns out that the lack of a legitimate Kabul government may be the real security threat. We are talking about the possible collapse of an extremely fragile, truly poor, aid-dependent Afghanistan; just as America, its strongest military and financial supporter, is getting ready to leave, for good.

We did not see this one coming

In all this, it seems that the Obama administration, once more, was caught by surprise. *"We did not see this one coming.*

And now, what do we do? “ It seems clear that, unless this incredibly bad electoral mess is resolved in a manner that leaves all major factions satisfied –and I do not see how this can be done– the legitimacy of the next Afghan President, no matter who is declared winner, will be undermined.

Leave Afghanistan?

This being the case, can Obama go ahead with his decision to leave Afghanistan in 2016? A poor country, in chaos, with an ongoing insurgency and an unresolved constitutional crisis?

It is not Obama’s fault that the world is in turmoil. But his instincts to withdraw, claiming as he did in a recent interview that, all in all we are lucky to live in the present times, because now the world is a much better place, are totally wrong. Obama’s instincts are at odds with reality.

Let’s see: Syria is in chaos, Iraq close to collapse. Putin gobbled Crimea, and messed up Eastern Ukraine. The Iranians are determined to acquire and keep a nuclear capability. China is trying to redraw maritime sovereignty in Asia, making preposterous claims on zones previously controlled by Japan and Vietnam. Israel is about to go to war with Hamas in Gaza. And now this mess in Afghanistan.

These problems are not Obama’s fault. Of course they are not. But it is fair to say that, as all this is going on, a US withdrawal from a shaky Afghanistan sends a really bad signal to a world that has no replacements for American leadership.

Susan Rice: Bergdahl Served With “Honor And Distinction” Because He Volunteered – Really?

WASHINGTON – The whole “liberation of Bowe Bergdahl” operation was supposed to be good public relations for President Obama. Instead, in the blink of an eye, it turned from heart warming *end-of-the -long-war* story into a gigantic fiasco for the Obama administration.

Fiasco

It turns out that the US went to great lengths to free a deserter about whom nobody who served with him has anything nice or even charitable to say. And the President, who should have known all this, still went ahead and made a high profile White House announcement about the regained freedom of a good American soldier held in captivity by the evil Taliban, with Bergdahl’s parents on his sides. So these are the people this President believes deserve special recognition? Deserters?

Obama defends his decision

Taken aback by the strong reactions about what was supposed to be good news, but still hoping that the general public will get tired of the story of how the administration traded 5 senior Taliban commanders held at Guantanamo Bay for 1 US soldier held by the Taliban who may actually be tried for desertion, Obama stood his ground.

Indeed, in subsequent days, the President reaffirmed –actually with defiance– that this was the right thing to do. You see, we are Americans. We do not leave any of our own behind, no matter who they are or what they did. We just do not do that,

under any circumstances.

Why the White House statement?

Well, this may be a good argument about working towards the liberation of any POW, Bergdahl included. But if it is so, if this is routine, established practice, what was the point of inviting Bergdahl's parents to the White House in order to make the announcement of the end of the long ordeal of a good American held in captivity ?

If Obama knew about Bergdahl's at least questionable service record, what was the point of describing him as a brave soldier who had to endure 5 long years in the hands of the Taliban?

Sadly, in all this Obama looks clueless, and therefore silly.

Susan Rice does it again

But, wait, for there is more. Indeed, Susan Rice, Obama's National Security Advisor, looks even worse. She did say on CNN, after the prisoners exchange and the eruption of the controversy, that Bowe Bergdahl was a good American soldier who had served "with honor and distinction". Really? A soldier who voluntarily abandoned his post in a war zone and disappeared served with "honor and distinction"?

"Honor and distinction"

When given a chance to explain what she meant, Ms. Rice said this:

"What I was referring to is the fact that this was a young man who volunteered to serve his country in uniform in a time of war. That is itself a very honorable thing".

Ah, you see, that explains it. What Ms. Rice really meant is something like this: *All members of the United States Armed Forces, no matter their actual record during their service,*

served with "honor and distinction" , because they all volunteered in a time of war. Bergdahl volunteered and so, no matter what he did or did not do during his service, he served "with honor and distinction".

Explanation worse than the statement

This "explanation" is preposterous, lame and silly. Think about it, according to Ms. Rice, all enlisted men or women, whatever their record during their service, automatically are recognized as having served with "honor and distinction" by virtue of the fact that they volunteered. Imagine this: while wearing the uniform, you committed war crimes. But, hey, you volunteered, and so you served with "honor and distinction".

The honorable thing would have been for Ms. Rice to apologize for having said something really out of place, in the light of what she knew or should have known about Bergdahl's desertion.

Remember the Benghazi story?

But no. She wanted to defend an absurd statement by explaining it. And so she said another preposterous thing.

Of course, it is impossible not to connect this implausible characterization of Bergdahl's military record with her deceitful explanation of the "Benghazi Attack" a few years ago, in September 2012.

At that time, she went on several TV shows repeating a misleading story about what caused the (September 11) attack against the US Consulate in Benghazi, Libya that resulted in the death of the US Ambassador and three other Americans. The point of that fabrication was to protect the President who was running for re-election.

This time she did not say that the characterization of Bergdahl as a very good soldier came from some "talking

points" she had been given. But the result is the same. She lost credibility.

Loss of credibility

There you have it: as a result of yet another botched affair, the President lost credibility; the National Security Advisor lost credibility.

In the broader context of "red lines" about the use of chemical weapons in Syria that have been crossed, inconclusive "negotiations" with Iran bent on acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities, token reprisals against Putin who acts like the neighborhood bully regarding Ukraine, while we offer meals ready to eat and socks as military aid to the Kiev government, (*this is not a joke*), all this makes me sad.