

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.

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 year 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.

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 not, 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 Will Not Fight ISIL

WASHINGTON – The Obama administration Middle East policy can be summarized with this proposition: *“Let’s do nothing, hoping nothing really bad happens during our watch”*.

Timid on Iran

And this includes the way in which the negotiations with Iran were conducted about nuclear issues. The effort was not about enforcing non-proliferation. It was mostly about trying to regulate proliferation, buying a little time now, hoping that the Iranian regime will mellow later on and decide not to openly pursue nuclear weapons 10 years from now.

The ISIL threat

Well, nuclear Iran aside, the fact is that some really bad things have already happened. Among these by far the worst is the rise of ISIL. It is almost incomprehensible how the Obama administration, from day one has consistently under estimated the horrendous implications of the emergence of this self-described Caliphate.

The fact is that now the Sunni minority in Iraq, along with a huge piece of Syria, are dominated by this radical movement. This is and will continue to be major trouble in an already troubled region.

ISIL inspires others

The very existence of ISIL as a functioning “state” dominated by radicals fuels and inspires more radicalism in the region. ISIL inspired movements are sprouting everywhere, from Libya to the Sinai peninsula in Egypt. It is impossible to predict

what these organizations will be able to do, but we should expect the worst.

More terror

Just consider the destruction of the Russian civilian airliner carrying tourists. If this accident was indeed caused by a bomb placed on board by ISIL members, (this is the theory now), we can see the far-reaching consequences of a few well crafted acts of terror carried out by ISIL members or sympathizers. In just one day Egyptian tourism has been essentially killed. No more tourists. One bomb, one downed airplane. Enormous economic damage.

Of course, with or without ISIL there will be other radical groups in the region, and some of them will engage in acts of terror. Still, the fact that militants know that there is an actual functioning state that embodies their beliefs is a tremendous morale booster. It reassures the true believers. It tells them that they are winning.

An ISIL defeat would demoralize militants

Imagine instead TV footage that shows ISIL fighters retreating and demoralized, many killed or taken prisoners, territory lost, their black flags gone. At the very least this would deflate the hopes of more would-be jihadists.

Incomprehensible indecision

Given all this, Obama's indecision in fighting this enduring menace (after having stated that his aim is to degrade and destroy ISIL) is almost incomprehensible. By allowing this cancer to attach itself to large parts of the region, Obama is disregarding the likely consequences. More radicalism, more violence and more terrorism.

Not the only issue

I fully realize that ISIL is not the only issue to be dealt

with. But it is the most virulent and therefore the most urgent. Conferences and high level meetings will not take care of it. America is the only country that has the military power to confront and destroy this menace.

Any day that goes by and ISIL is still there, flying its flags, is a day of victory for all the militants.

US Troops In Syria?

WASHINGTON – What do we make of the announcement by the Obama administration about its decision to send about 50 US Special Operations troops into Northern Syria? Is this part of a larger strategy? Is America about to get serious in its declared fight against ISIL?

No strategy

I would not count on any of this. Quite frankly, it is hard to detect any US strategy. When President Assad reacted violently against any political dissent that was stimulated by the Arab Spring, America did nothing. After the situation in Syria got worse, America made noises but did essentially nothing. When ISIL, taking advantage of the mess in Syria took over a big chunk of the country, America did nothing. Worse yet, when an emboldened ISIL launched its invasion of Iraq from its bases in Syria, Obama reacted with surprise; but continued to do essentially nothing, while blaming (with some cause) the Shia majority government in Baghdad for its failure to establish good relations with the Sunni minority.

The coalition did little

Sure enough, after months of hesitation, Obama announced that

America had formed a large and powerful coalition (more than 60 countries, we are told) whose objective was and is to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Well, notwithstanding a few bombing raids here and there, ISIL is still pretty much in control of a large chunk of Syria and most of North Western Iraq.

Put it differently, America is not winning. (Allowing a terrorist state to keep its grip on a large piece of territory in the heart of the Middle East has huge detrimental political implications. Just by being there, the self-described Caliphate can claim victory. But we shall not focus on this pernicious aspect of the crisis here).

Others stepping in

In the meantime, under ISIL's attack Syria is falling apart, while the US \$ 500 million program to train and arm pro-Western Syrian rebels went absolutely nowhere. And now? Now it is an even bigger mess.

Iraq is openly supported by the Iranians in its fight against ISIL. Assad is supplied by the Iranians and is assisted by Hezbollah fighters. Most recently, Russia decided to intervene militarily in order to support Assad. It may impossible to regain control over the entire country, but at least Russia will to its best to allow its weakened ally to keep a piece of it, while Moscow will retain its valuable military bases.

What about America?

And what about America? Well, who knows, really. The anti-ISIL "Grand Coalition" was and is a fiction. The US-led military effort against ISIL is modest, in fact pitiful.

And now, what? Well, now Washington is sending about 50 military advisers to help the Kurds in Northern Syria.

Not what I would call a game changer.

US Navy Challenges Beijing In The South China Sea

WASHINGTON – The Obama administration does not have a stellar record either on national security issues or on upholding basic principles of international law. Just look at its retreat from Iraq, the tentative, in fact unserious air campaign against ISIS, and the near disaster in Afghanistan. Not to mention its passivity regarding Putin's neo-imperial ambitions in Ukraine.

Freedom of navigation

Precisely because of this disappointing record, it is important to note Washington's clear intention to affirm freedom of navigation in international waters in the South China Sea. This strong position on a matter of principle—protecting freedom of navigation—is a big deal. Indeed, if Obama is serious about upholding this cardinal principle of international law, this may put the US and China on a collision course.

Enter the US Navy

Today's news is that the USS Lassen, a US Navy guided missile destroyer, openly and intentionally sailed within 12 miles off the Spratly Islands, in the South China Sea. The point was and is to challenge Beijing's bogus claims that the islands belong to China and that no ships have the right to sail within what China claim to be its territorial waters.

What is the end game?

I applaud Washington's move. But I am not sure that there is a

clear end game here. The point of asserting freedom of navigation is that you have to keep doing it. One isolated gesture simply will not do it.

Since the Chinese will not unilaterally give up their "rights", Beijing's claims need to be voided by showing that they will not be enforced. And this means US and other vessels sailing through these waters claimed by China, routinely.

But this could become dangerous. What if the Chinese decide to react with force, claiming that this is only "self-defense" against an "American invasion"? Then, what next?

China's build-up

Let's go back a bit. Here is the story. For the past few years, the Chinese have been busy occupying several reefs and disputed rocks spread around the South China Sea. They have simply taken them over, sometimes forcing out vessels belonging to other countries, like Vietnam. They have built these reefs up, including the construction of ports and runways that can accommodate military aircraft. And now they claim that these artificial islands are, and have always been an integral part of China's territory.

On the basis of this most extraordinary claim based essentially on nothing, the Chinese Government also claims sovereignty on almost the entire South China Sea where these various reefs and rocks are located. Beijing's contention is that China has exclusive sovereignty on the waters around its islands (a 12 mile radius). By the same token, Beijing states that it also has a much larger Exclusive Economic Zone around them.

Bogus claims

According to international law, this would be indeed the case when we are talking about the coast line of a country, or real islands belonging to that country. The problem is that these

are not real islands, and therefore they cannot be the basis for any territorial claims.

The additional problem is that, given the geography, there are other states that claim part of the those waters as their own. Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and others have asserted that they should have control over at least some of the waters surrounding these rocks. And all the other parties agree that these territorial and maritime disputes should be settled through diplomacy and negotiations.

Well, the Chinese disagree. They have simply take over and established firm control over these rocks, turning them into Chinese islands.

Challenging America?

Now, let's look at the broader context. How could this happen? America used to be a super power with a large and unchallenged naval presence in the Pacific. Twenty or thirty years ago China would not have done this. But now it did.

Is this reckless behavior, or was it a calculated move? Did Beijing act unilaterally counting on Washington's weakness and passivity? Certainly, when Chinese diplomats observe Washington's tepid reactions vis-a-vis Putin's open aggression in Ukraine, it is easy to conclude that America is in retreat. Hence an opportunity to grab stuff and expand Beijing military presence in a strategic area, without any fear of retribution.

What next?

But now (unexpectedly?) Washington is taking a stand. The Obama administration, through Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, declared that China's claims are invalid, and against international law. Sending a US Navy ship close to islands that Beijing claims belong to China is a clear signal. Needless to say, Beijing loudly protested, accusing America of

creating a crisis.

OK for now. But what about later? If the US Navy keeps doing this, Beijing may capitulate and give up its preposterous claims. Or it may not capitulate. It may instead decide to “do something” to assert them.

Well, you get the picture. You see where this can go. We are talking about a possible military escalation, with the possibility of Chinese and American vessels colliding, or even shooting at each other.

China cannot retreat

If the Chinese simply miscalculated, if they engaged in this significant build-up in the South China Sea on the assumption that a weak America would do nothing, then we may have a real problem. Having gone this far, China cannot simply quietly retreat, and pretend that nothing ever happened. Talk about “losing face”.

But if America is serious about asserting freedom of navigation in what are indeed international waters, then we may get into unknown territory. America still has an impressive Navy. But not as impressive as it used to be. Besides, the action is taking place close to China. And this gives beefed up Chinese naval forces an inherent tactical advantage.

This may get ugly

As of now, military clashes, (let alone a real war), between the US and China are a pretty remote possibility. But when you have two navies with orders to challenge each other because governments have to stick to their script, sparks may fly.

Stay tuned, because this may get a lot worse.

The Real Benghazi Story Is The False Explanation Of the Tragedy, Motivated By Politics

WASHINGTON – The much-anticipated appearance by Hillary Clinton, former Secretary of State and now leading Democratic Party presidential contender, before the House Committee on the Benghazi terror attack, has not added anything new.

Nothing new

I have seen nothing that makes me change my mind on what happened in Benghazi in 2012, on that unhappy anniversary of September 11, when the US Consulate was attacked by radicals, and 4 Americans, including Christopher Stevens, the US Ambassador, were killed.

Here is the story

Here is my (perhaps) over simplified summary. The US Government, in this particular case the State Department led by then Secretary Clinton, did not appreciate that post-Gaddafi Libya was a very dangerous place. Indeed, requests for additional security made by the US Embassy, and personally by Ambassador Stevens, were not seriously considered. As a result the Libya posts had inadequate protection.

Sadly, when the Benghazi facility came under attack on September 11, 2012, insufficient American defenses were overwhelmed. People got killed.

Well, this is sad. Of course, in hindsight it is always easy

to point fingers and conclude that then Secretary Clinton was and is responsible for these deaths. But this would be somewhat unfair. Hundreds, possibly thousands of possible threats to US diplomatic posts come in every day. Hard to respond to all of them. Hard to prioritize in the most appropriate manner.

Bad judgment

In the case of Benghazi, it is obvious that everybody, including then Secretary of State Clinton, dropped the ball. They did not understand the severity of the situation, and they did not beef up security.

Well, what can we say. This was a huge mistake. But we are all human, and therefore fallible.

Here is the real story

However, this is not the real story.

The real story is about how the Obama administration –and this includes then Secretary Clinton– reacted to this tragedy. Indeed, after the news of the Benghazi attack came out, the Obama White House, fearful of the possible negative political repercussion on Obama –keep in mind that this happened just week before the November 2012 presidential elections– deliberately introduced a bogus explanation about what caused the attack.

Avoid political repercussions

It is clear that they desperately wanted to avoid any accusation that the Obama administration had underestimated the possibility of more terror attacks against Americans.

And why this concern?

Well, because President Obama had claimed that his administration had successfully decimated al Qaeda. The

official narrative throughout the 2012 political campaign had been that, after the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011 by US special forces, the terrorism threat was essentially gone –for good.

Therefore, one had to find an “explanation” for the Benghazi tragedy –clearly an act of terrorism– that would say that the attack was in fact about something else.

Nothing to do with terrorism.

Hence the introduction of the “*video did it*” bogus story. In order to muddy the waters, the Obama people came out with the clever explanation whereby the Benghazi attack was a spontaneous popular reaction to a video released in America that attacked Islam, and was therefore considered blasphemous by many believers in the Arab world, including Libya.

Ambassador Rice sent out to tell the bogus “video” story

This being “the truth” that they wanted American voters to believe –again, remember that all this occurred just weeks before the presidential elections– the Obama White House sent then UN Ambassador Susan Rice to appear on many TV programs, so that she could deliver this false narrative whereby “*the anti-Muslim video caused the Benghazi attack*”.

This was not said casually. This was carefully plotted. They all knew that they were telling a lie, with the obvious goal of protecting a President on the eve of a crucial vote. Once again, as the record of her public and private pronouncements indicates, Secretary of State Clinton, was a willful participant. She repeated the bogus story about “the video”, while she knew the truth, as her own e-mails –now public– revealed.

Deliberate manipulation

In my judgment, this is the real problem. Yes, we can all

agree that Secretary Clinton and her staff showed poor judgement in handling the security of US posts in Libya. As a result, the US Consulate in Benghazi was not properly protected. This is bad. But it was an error. May be an egregious, unforgivable error. But it is still an error.

What followed instead was deliberate manipulation motivated by politics. This may have been clever, but it was and is morally reprehensible.

Willful distortion

And this is the real problem. We cannot accuse Hillary Clinton of having deliberately overlooked the security situation of the US diplomatic posts in Libya. But she happily joined the conspiracy aimed at distorting what actually happened in the night of September 11, 2012 in order to help her boss, President Obama.

Again, all this is morally reprehensible. If we give Hillary Clinton a pass on this, by saying that "It is a well-known fact that all politicians lie or at least engage in willful distortions", we are deliberately lowering our moral standards.

A democracy run by duplicitous liars is not going to be a healthy place. If we choose them as our leaders, whatever damage they will cause in the long run, will be our fault.

A New President Who Knows Nothing About Foreign Policy?

WASHINGTON – The recent Cleveland debates featuring all 17

Republicans who want to be president revealed that within this vast array of mostly professional politicians, there are only a couple with some international affairs knowledge, and no one with real, hands on, experience.

Governors make good Presidents

For sure we have a sizable number of Governors and former Governors who are running. Here is the long list: Scott Walker from Wisconsin, John Kasich from Ohio, Chris Christie from New Jersey, Bobby Jindal from Louisiana, Jeb Bush from Florida, Jim Gilmore from Virginia, George Pataki from New York, Mike Huckabee from Arkansas. And this is good, (at least we hope so).

The conventional wisdom is that good Governors are potentially good Presidents. After all, they do most of the things that Presidents do, albeit on a smaller scale.

They are states' CEOs. They run things. They are responsible for large budgets. They have to create coalitions. They have to prioritize and lead in order to promote the economy, business creation, employment, education, and general welfare.

No foreign affairs experience

However, Governors have almost nothing to do with foreign and security matters. At best, some of them are involved in some limited international economic and trade issues, such as investment and export promotion.

And so, here is the picture. If any of these 17 GOP candidates gets into the White House, America will be led by a President who has practically zero experience in international and security matters. This is not good. (I should mention that Senator Lindsey Graham from South Carolina is a defense and security issues expert. However, his chances of getting the GOP nomination are extremely low).

In this respect, at least looking at formal credentials, Hillary Clinton, the likely Democratic Party nominee, looks a lot better. She has been Secretary of State for 4 years. Prior to that, as Senator from New York, Clinton served on the prestigious Armed Services Committee.

Nobody focused on this weakness

Well, be that as it may, nobody pointed out this huge weakness of total inexperience in a crucial area. The issue of foreign affairs competence does not even come up in any analysis of the GOP candidates.

In fact, it looks as if nobody really cares about this huge shortcoming. Within the Cleveland main debate, (featuring the 10 top candidates), there was only little time devoted to foreign policy. And the few questions that were asked focused entirely on current affairs: Iran, ISIL and Putin's Russia.

Europe and Japan, America's key post-war allies, were not even mentioned. Nothing specific about the rise of China. Nothing about major international trade negotiations. Nothing on the impact of globalization on the US economy. Nothing about large emerging countries such as Brazil or Indonesia. Nothing about relations with the Arab world. Nothing about the future of US-Israel relations.

A new President who knows nothing about foreign policy

So, here is the thing. Assuming a Republican victory, America may get (I hope) a competent, "let's-get-things-done", former or sitting Governor as Chief Executive.

But this new President, even if he is excellent on domestic issues, will be totally clueless about US foreign policy. He will have no intuitive understanding about the national interest and how best to protect it. And he will be unknown in the rest of the world.

Given all this, most likely he will depend upon the advise of experts whose judgement is often clouded by ideological agendas.

Please remember the Iraq disaster ordered by former Texas Governor George W. Bush. Bush was another state CEO who came into the White House knowing practically nothing about the world.

Because of his ignorance, he relied on the supposedly sophisticated insights of the neo-cons who had a dream about creating democracy in Iraq. And so he ordered an invasion, and spent close to US \$ 1 trillion trying to make Iraq into a modern democracy. The whole enterprise was and is a gigantic failure, due mostly to gigantic bad judgment.

Who will be in charge?

This being the case, let's hope that the next President, lacking any substantive understanding about foreign and security affairs, will have the common sense of picking level-headed people to run the Pentagon and the State Department, and a sensible professional as National Security Adviser.

If he picks ideologues with agendas, then we are in deep trouble.