

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.

Donald Trump And Nuclear Weapons

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

Modernize U.S. nuclear weapons

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

That said, here is what President-elect Donald Trump could say and do about the American nuclear arsenal, if his purpose

were, as I hope, to reaffirm the long-standing U.S. policy whereby peace is ensured by a robust and always credible American nuclear arsenal that can and will be used in case of an attack.

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

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

The importance of Command and Control

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

This is all about the goal of conveying to our adversaries that America's nuclear deterrent will always be a viable option in any and all situations. Even under the most catastrophic scenarios, there will always be a surviving, legitimate Commander in Chief in full control of all U.S. nuclear weapons. Even if the President and Vice President and other national security leaders down the chain of command

were killed by terror attacks, a legitimate U.S. National Command Authority will always survive, fully prepared to retaliate massively against any aggressor.

Always prepared

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

Invest in ballistic missile defense

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

Hence the need to protect America with robust missile defenses capable of intercepting and destroying incoming North Korean nuclear armed missiles before they reach U.S. soil. As odd as this may sound, America at this time has a very limited number of interceptors. They are woefully inadequate to guarantee our security against rogue nuclear powers that cannot be deterred by the threat of massive retaliation.

Reliable nuclear weapons reinforce stability

Should president Trump announce such policy objectives, they should be interpreted by all observers –domestic and foreign–

as reassuring. America will continue to rely on its nuclear deterrent. However, for such a deterrent to be credible, and therefore for nuclear weapons to act as a stabilizing force, it has to be modernized, in order to guarantee its reliability, resilience and survival under any scenarios.

Obsolete weapons create instability

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

Keep the peace

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

There will be no surprises

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

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

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.

Forget About Assad – America Should Focus on Fighting ISIL

WASHINGTON – What are Obama’s options regarding an American “Syria Policy” aimed at supporting the emergence of a democratic state over there? None. Simply stated, we cannot fight and win against ISIL, (entrenched both in Syria and Iraq), while also trying to get rid of President Assad, as he is protected by Russia, Iran, and Iran-funded Hezbollah.

Focus on ISIL

As we should really focus on ISIL, the broader threat, we should let go of any plans aimed at replacing Assad.

As we remember, when the Arab Spring reformist winds reached Syria, President Bashar al-Assad responded with characteristic brutality. Street demonstrators were met with force. Many were killed.

At the very beginning of what (years later) turned out to be a human tragedy of monumental proportions, the Obama administration postured. It issued strong statements,

proclamations. *"Assad has got to go"*, Obama stated.

Yes, except that there was no appetite to do anything that would actually *make him* go. At that time, may be there was still a chance to support the moderate, reasonably pro-western Syrian opposition. But that opportunity, assuming that it was viable, came and went.

ISIL firmly entrenched

What happened instead is that the group that became known later on as ISIL managed to exploit the unfolding civil strife within the country to gain control of a huge part of Eastern Syria. From there, the jihadists subsequently managed to quickly invade North Western Iraq, encountering no opposition, because they were viewed as "liberators" by the Sunni majority who live there.

After this territorial conquest, they proclaimed the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in the territories they control. And it is clear that they believe to be engaged in a global battle whose final objective is Islam's victory against the rest of the world.

As the situation on the ground rapidly deteriorated, the US administration looked surprised. The impression is that they did not see any of this coming. Since then, not much has happened, except for the mounting destruction within Syria caused by Assad's forces, various insurgents, ISIL, and now Russian bombs.

America's air war

True, after much hesitation, President Obama finally declared that America would fight ISIL in order to finally defeat it. Yes, except that the military effort (a limited air war) is so minimal that many people wonder if America means this or not.

But let's look at where we are now. With America largely

absent, Iran and its proxies, plus Russia entered the fray in Syria. (Iran is also supporting the Shia Government in Iraq in its own fight against ISIL).

Russia and Iran protecting Assad

It is clear that Russia and Iran want to save Assad, even though the Syrian President's position has deteriorated. Meanwhile, both America and Iran seem to share an interest in dislodging ISIL from its strongholds in Iraq and Syria.

Given all this, it is clear that America cannot even remotely aspire to obtain its old objective of supporting the emergence of a free, democratic Syria. Syria is now a semi-destroyed, hopeless country. Assad is protected by two major powers. And we have no influence there.

Destroy ISIL

What we can and should do is to destroy ISIL, because its very existence fans the flames of a global, if disorganized, jihadist ideology and groups that support it through violent means, (witness the acts of terrorism in France and elsewhere).

I believe that ISIL's ability to convince thousands of young Muslims to engage in "home-made" jihad is vastly overstated. Still, ISIL is a dangerous cancer now firmly planted in the heart of the Middle East. It has to be eradicated.

Forget about Syria

As for Syria, let's look at it realistically. Did Assad ever launch any messianic, anti-western movement? No, he did not. Was he behind terror attacks against the US Homeland? No, he was not. He was yet another Middle Eastern nasty autocrat. Unpleasant, yes. But no direct threat to the security of the United States. Bottom line: we can live with him.

No deal with ISIL

But we cannot “do a deal” with ISIL. ISIL needs to be eradicated. Is it possible for Washington to work with Russia and may be even Iran on this? Who knows.

Still, whatever the chances of a serious anti-ISIL coalition, Russia and Iran will continue to support Assad.

As we have no way to convince them otherwise, we better admit this reality, forget about Assad, and focus on ISIL.

[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.

Ayatollah Khamenei Warns About US “Deceit And Treachery”

WASHINGTON – According to Reuters, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Tuesday approved the lifting of sanctions against Iran, the first major economic benefit coming out of the nuclear deal reached last year with Washington and other Powers.

America is still the enemy

Still, in case we had any doubts, he stressed that nothing has changed regarding the fundamentals of US-Iran relations:

“I reiterate the need to be vigilant about the deceit and treachery of arrogant countries, especially the United States, in this (nuclear) issue and other issues.”

Well, hopefully one day this hostile rhetoric will vanish. We have been told by the Obama administration that Iran is becoming nicer, more willing to behave accordingly to international rules.

Wishful thinking in Washington

May be so. Still, for the moment, open anti-Americanism continues to be the official doctrine. We better not forget

this. Wishful thinking regarding positive transformations within Iran, unsupported by facts, is not good guidance for US foreign policy.

The West Is Impotent Regarding North Korea

WASHINGTON – North Korea is at it again. Apparently dictator Kim Jong Un ordered another atomic test, claiming that this time it was a hydrogen device, and not a simple atomic bomb. On the basis of seismic data, Western observers dispute the claim, but everybody is worried.

A dictator with atomic bombs and missiles

An unpredictable dictatorship armed with atomic (or nuclear) weapons is obviously a source of concern. US military planners concede that soon enough North Korea may be able to launch ballistic missiles that can reach Alaska, Hawaii, and possibly the West Coast of the United States.

The world does nothing

What is most extraordinary in all this is that the entire world, while complaining, does absolutely nothing. Look, I do realize that it is not easy to fix this North Korean problem. This is after all a sizable country of about 25 million people, run by a despot with absolute powers.

The China angle

And there is an additional problem. In some fashion, China

still supports the North Koreans. In fact many argue that without Chinese help the regime would probably collapse. Analysts believe that the semi-reformed Chinese would rather have North Korea run by crazy Jim Jong Un as a neighbor than a reunified, pro-Western Korea allied with the United States. For this reason, until China keeps supporting or at least tolerating North Korea, not much that the rest of the world can do.

Still, while allowing that Chinese political concerns have to be taken into account, I find this explanation for inaction close to absurd. Assuming Western unity and determination to get rid of the Kim dynasty in North Korea, there has to be a way to come to an agreement with China on a mutually acceptable future for a reunified, peaceful Korean Peninsula that will not threaten Chinese interests and security.

How strong is North Korea?

That said, how strong is North Korea? How big of a challenge is it? Yes, we do know that they are spending a great deal of resources on their nuclear program and on their military. But what about everything else? Well, here is how the CIA World Fact Book describes the North Korean economy:

“North Korea, one of the world’s most centrally directed and least open economies, faces chronic economic problems. Industrial capital stock is nearly beyond repair as a result of years of underinvestment, shortages of spare parts, and poor maintenance.

Large-scale military spending draws off resources needed for investment and civilian consumption. Industrial and power outputs have stagnated for years at a fraction of pre-1990 levels.

Frequent weather-related crop failures aggravated chronic food shortages caused by on-going systemic problems, including a lack of arable land, collective farming practices, poor soil

quality, insufficient fertilization, and persistent shortages of tractors and fuel. The mid 1990s were marked by severe famine and widespread starvation. Significant food aid was provided by the international community through 2009. Since that time, food assistance has declined significantly. In the last few years, domestic corn and rice production has been somewhat better, although domestic production does not fully satisfy demand.

A large portion of the population continues to suffer from prolonged malnutrition and poor living conditions.”

A poor country

There you have it: **“Industrial capital stock nearly beyond repair”, “chronic food shortages”, “severe famine”, “malnutrition”**. Yes, this is mighty North Korea, the menacing foe that’s keeping the entire civilized world on edge. A poor country that cannot feed its people, relying on a decrepit industrial base.

Want more data? North Korea’s per capita GDP is US \$ 1,800, one notch *below* super impoverished Haiti, a true basket case.

All in all, I would not call North Korea a formidable foe. This is not exactly Hitler’s Germany on the eve of WWII; nor does it look like the mighty Soviet Union of the 1970s.

This is an impoverished, horribly backward country, with no competitive economic sectors.

Powerless international community

And yet, the entire civilized world –The US, Canada, Japan, the European Union, South Korea, Australia, India and other developed countries– cannot come together to deal with this North Korea problem. They seem to be totally powerless when confronted with the threatening behavior of a third-rate

dictatorship.

It is clear that North Korea is not deterred by anybody. For years it has been doing exactly what it pleases with its ongoing nuclear program. The country is obviously in violation, (multiple times), of international UN obligations regarding non proliferation. But, beyond routine protests and condemnations, neither Washington nor anybody else has done anything serious to make North Korea stop this.

Western timidity

Sadly, this timidity tells us a lot more about the fundamental weakness of the West than about North Korea's strength. We are talking about the combined resources of the largest and most advanced industrial democracies of the world versus puny North Korea; and North Korea essentially wins –every time. It keeps violating major international obligations about non proliferation, and it pays no price.

How others see us

If this passivity regarding the illegal actions of a dictatorship with a decrepit economy, plagued by chronic malnutrition is the measure of Western resolve against rogue states exhibiting menacing behavior, then no wonder that Vladimir Putin's Russia, the Chinese and the Iranians feel rather relaxed when dealing with Washington or Berlin.

The Terror Threat Will Not End

WASHINGTON – Terror attacks hatched by crazy militants

underscore the deep vulnerabilities of modern, open societies. They trigger an avalanche of emotional and sometimes useless reactions. After Paris was hit hard (yet again) by another cell of Islamic radicals, French President Francois Hollande declared passionately that France is clearly under military assault, and that this is “war”.

Hit them hard?

Well, this being war, as a response to this ISIL-led “military operation” aimed at Paris, Hollande dispatched French jet fighters to hit targets in Raqqa, Syria, the de facto capital of the ISIL-led, “Caliphate”.

Does this response make any sense? Symbolically, may be. But as a military reaction, not a lot; unless Hollande intends to engage up to the end, namely until the complete annihilation of the Caliphate. Well, first of all, France does not have the military tools to do this. Besides, even complete success would only be a partial victory.

Destroy the Caliphate

I have argued here, several times, that the destruction of the self-described Caliphate would help the “anti-Islamic radicalism” effort. Indeed, the very existence of this bizarre but quite real state, right in the heart of the Middle East, is a source of pride and inspiration for all Islamic militants, and a powerful tool to get more recruits willing to go there, and fight “for the cause”.

That said, I am under no illusion that even the complete and final destruction of the Caliphate will take care of the anti-Western terror problem. At least some of the more committed militants will melt away from the ISIL-controlled territories in Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq and will regroup somewhere else.

A difficult agenda

Well, so what is to be done? There is no simple answer. There is no clear recipe that will quickly lead the West to “victory”. Let’s be clear, even in this strange conflict, “victory” will take place only when all the known and unknown terrorists have been caught, and I mean all of them; and –most crucial– nobody else will be willing to follow their example and engage in any fresh terror plots.

In other words, as in all conflicts, large or small, all the enemy combatants and would-be combatants have to say clearly and unequivocally: “We lost. We are done. No more fighting”.

This is the strategic objective of any conflict, and the only possible definition of “victory”. This must be the goal.

But in this conflict against a variety of terror groups it is an extremely difficult goal. And here is why.

Many foot soldiers

Whether we like it or not, there are thousands and thousands of people across the Muslim world, and within Muslim communities in Western countries, who now see the West as their mortal enemy. They are not going to change their mind on this any time soon. And there is not much we can do to about any of this.

It is easy

Besides, planning and executing acts of terrorism targeting civilians in Paris, New York, or Berlin is very easy. Right now, it only takes a few motivated people willing to die in a suicide mission to hatch a terror plot. And, sadly, there seem to be plenty of them.

The idea that the Paris terror attacks are the result of a highly sophisticated command and control structure is nonsense. Sure enough, it takes some planning and coordination

to plot and execute, simultaneously, multiple attacks. But it is not that complicated. The terrorists identified a number of unprotected, soft targets, (a soccer stadium, a concert hall, and restaurants). Going there and opening fire, indiscriminately, against unarmed civilians is not that difficult.

It is cheap

And it gets even worse. These type of attacks against soft targets are cheap. Very cheap. A recent Reuters story quoted some experts who calculated the up front cost of the Paris terror attacks: about 7,000 Euro, approximately US \$ 7,500.

Well, this is next to nothing. Even if the real amount spent is higher, say 20,000 Euro, it is still a very low bar. So, here is the thing. The barrier to entry to be a terror group is extremely low. You need a few, motivated people who know how to handle fire arms, and some cash.

How to protect ourselves

Having said all this, how do we protect ourselves? Sadly, a perfect shield does not exist. The main line of defense has to be more and better intelligence. Admittedly, this is a never-ending, thankless job.

There are millions of young, unhappy Muslims who may fit the profile of a would-be terrorist. How do you vet all of them? Impossible. Sure, we can get better at this. But we cannot become perfect.

In the meantime, we can extend police and intelligence services powers. But this creates a conflict with the need to protect our civil liberties. Therefore, here we have an issue. How far can we go? Do we want to become a police state, so that the police can better protect us? It is obvious that this can lead us down a dangerous road.

There is no strategy

Anyway, here is the thing. Bombing Raqqa a couple of times is not a serious strategy. A serious strategy would have to include the complete destruction of IS and the Caliphate. But even this would not be enough.

A serious strategy would have to include the creation of an alternative message that could be embraced by those who now choose militancy and terror plots. This would be the real "silver bullet" that would defeat terrorism. But I doubt that anybody can come up with a new, more appealing "peaceful package" that would actually "sell". The end game here is to convince young militants that there are better ways to get more opportunities in the societies they live in. Unfortunately, nobody is that smart. As yet, nobody developed a new message that can gain real traction.

Silly grandstanding, empty talk

In the meantime, though, we waste time grandstanding with unproductive talk of "war". Here in Washington, we waste time with stupid debates about how we should vet Syrian refugees who want to come to America. The idea that several US Governors and a majority of the members of the House have really nothing better to do other than demanding more stringent vetting of poor souls from Syria, in case some of them may be terrorists in disguise, is disheartening. Yes, potentially this may be an issue. But we already have a very stringent vetting process. Refugees do not just walk in. It takes several months of checks and re-checks.

In any event, is this all we can do? How about giving more resources to the FBI, the federal agency with the people who know something about the threat? And how about getting serious about destroying the Caliphate?

The West Is Caught In Middle East Chaos

WASHINGTON – The Paris terror attacks lead to Syria, to the Arab Spring, to the Sunni-Shia conflicts, to al Qaeda, and to the rise of ISIL and of the Caliphate. This is a huge mess; and there are no quick solutions. The real issue is not about catching a few bad guys. The issue is in endless religious strife in which opposing militants in the Middle East have long lists of mortal enemies. The West is on many of them.

Chaos

Here is the sad truth. The Middle East and parts of North Africa are in total chaos. Within many societies there is a structural inability to chart a rational course towards modernity focused on education, enterprise, more gender equality, inclusiveness, genuine political freedoms, and religious tolerance.

No viable path to modernity

This inability to choose and pursue modern, secular development models fuels economic stagnation, poverty and despair. Prolonged stagnation fuels resentment. A great deal of this resentment is now channeled into religiously inspired movements.

These movements preach violent actions against various enemies: rapacious and corrupt governments, other religious sects, Christians, you name it. According to the militants, only the physical destruction of their enemies will bring about true religious piety, peace, justice, and prosperity.

Of course, none of this is true. What is true is that, inspired by this folly, religious believers have created a disheartening cycle of violence that generates violent reactions, followed by more violence.

Enter the Caliphate

Without exaggeration, this is chaos. At least in some parts of the region, (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen in the Middle East; Libya in North Africa), unmanageable chaos. The creation of the self-described Caliphate in parts of Syria and subsequently Iraq made this turmoil even worse, in as much as it created a tangible symbol of what is viewed by some Sunni militants as a successful religious revolution.

The West is caught in this mess

Deep down, the West has really nothing to do with any of this. However both Europe and the US are caught into this trap because of old historic ties to the Middle East and more recent connections related to their dependence on oil and gas produced in the Region.

In the case of the US, there were also high-profile, complex relations with the discredited regime of the Shah in Iran. And then there were military interventions: the first Iraq war in 1991, and then the occupation of Iraq in 2003.

Europe is exposed

In the case of Europe, there is a mix of old colonial ties and more recently a huge migration into Europe from the Middle East and North Africa. In France alone, (population almost 65 million), there are about 5 million Muslims, most of them of Arab descent. In Belgium, Muslim are 6% of the population, in Austria 5.7%, in the Netherlands 5.5%.

Anyway, you get the picture. Many of these immigrants, for whatever reasons feel discriminated against, marginalized,

humiliated, or worse. Therefore, many of them look at the radical movements in the Middle East as an answer to their quest for meaning and belonging.

Disaffected young Muslims

And so here you can see how the Middle East/North Africa religion-inspired chaos has been exported into Europe. There is a back and forth of French-born, Belgium-born, UK-born would-be militants who have traveled to Syria or elsewhere. They have been recruited. They now believe that exporting Jihad into Europe is a good way to advance their cause, because Europe is somehow responsible for the plight of the Arab World and beyond.

The road to Paris

And this leads us to the tragic Paris massacres perpetrated by some young French and Belgians terrorists of Middle Eastern origin.

Sadly, because of all the above, it should be reasonably clear that there are no quick fixes to any of this. The Middle East will be in turmoil for who knows how long. The ISIL Caliphate can be attacked and destroyed. But, even assuming a successful operation, the attackers should have a workable game plan on how to reintegrate the Sunnis who lived under ISIL into the main stream. Good luck with that.

Mission Impossible

As for "Combating Terror", this is almost "Mission Impossible". As I indicated above, in Europe there are tens of millions of Muslims. Even assuming that only a tiny fraction of them are potentially dangerous individuals willing to engage in acts of terror, police authorities and intelligence agencies simply do not have the resources to sift through millions of people and identify all the bad guys before they act.

In the US the picture is a little better because there are far fewer Muslims, and therefore not so many individuals who may represent a potential threat.

Be prepared to absorb the consequences

Still, be that as it may, the West has to be prepared to absorb the violent consequences of an enormous crisis affecting many countries. Terrorism is the most unfortunate manifestation of the intellectual and moral chaos now rampant in the Middle East. And it is very hard to protect ourselves against it, in large part because there are too many potential suspects, and in part because we live in free societies in which individual liberties are protected and police powers are limited by the law.

Allow enhanced police powers?

Of course, we could collectively and indefinitely do what France just did in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. Declare an open-ended state of emergency. This would allow law enforcement agencies to do pretty much all they want, including arrests without warrants, search and seizure operations, and what not. Forget about "probable cause". But this is not doable. We love our freedoms.

Free but vulnerable

Therefore, as we want to stay free, we also have to accept our inherent vulnerability. Nobody from the outside can fix the Middle East. And its turmoil will go on and on. And terrorism aimed at Western targets is unfortunately a manifestation of this turmoil.