Military interventions have traditionally been a source of controversy in the United States. But America’s appetite for the dispatch of armed forces has been diminished greatly by factors that have primarily emerged in the twenty-first century. These include, most painfully, the protracted campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq that have made US political and military leaders more cautious about waging wars to end tyranny or internal disorder in foreign lands.

Debates on military intervention are complicated by the network of political, security and economic interests that must be balanced when contemplating this option. Four factors, all relatively recent developments, heavily influence the current calculus.

Firstly, since the end of the Cold War, the US has found it difficult to define a coherent and consistent international security strategy. This is a fact, and not a criticism. Indeed, through much of world history, great-power grand strategies have been highly contingent and rarely observed.

The George W. Bush administration tried to be an exception. It concluded after 9/11 that a grand strategy based on American power and a willingness to use it could be re-established and reconceived towards the creation of ‘a balance of power that favors freedom’. But, for reasons...
now familiar, this approach could not be sustained. And so, looking at the quarter-century since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, we are left with a bundle of security policies conditioned by various orienting principles, such as non-proliferation, counter-proliferation, financial-sector stability, reduction of greenhouse gasses and the responsibility to protect foreign peoples from humanitarian catastrophe. Prioritisation is difficult, due to the cross-cutting nature of most issues, so proposed military interventions are all the more contentious.

A second factor influencing American debates on military intervention is economic. Americans view the serious domestic fiscal and political problems that the US has experienced over the past decade as related in part to its involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The difficult experience of trying to rebuild an economy devastated by unprecedented deficit spending in support of lengthy foreign wars left the American people with a deeply diminished appetite for armed intervention. While defence outlays were far smaller than social-welfare and interest payments, the military, diplomatic, economic and human costs of two increasingly unpopular wars were politically more visible.

This shift in attitude away from the desire to fight wars to resolve internal disputes abroad was clearly reflected in the Obama administration’s 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, which identified the economic vitality of the US as a primary goal. President Barack Obama emphasised the importance of having a strong domestic economy as the cornerstone of a sound and effective national-security strategy in his December 2009 speech at West Point, in which, even as he ordered an additional 30,000 troops into Afghanistan, he limited the scope of the mission: ‘that’s why our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended – because the nation that I’m most interested in building is our own.’

Thirdly, and related to the economic impact, the American people’s scepticism regarding the use of force has grown over the past decade. This scepticism has been mischaracterised as war-weariness. But, for a people to be weary of war, they would have had to have paid a price for their country’s involvement in armed conflict. Yet the US military is an all-volunteer organisation. No American citizens were drafted into the uniformed ser-
sives to fight either in Afghanistan or Iraq. Moreover, the deficit spending to finance war costs, coupled with ill-timed tax cuts, meant that the vast majority of Americans simply bore no direct personal or evident economic price for these military interventions.

The fallout only came with the great recession, which began in late 2007. Americans started to focus on increasingly worrisome domestic problems, such as government gridlock, unemployment, troublesome trends in the financial sector, and the costs of healthcare and education. In light of these concerns, coupled with disappointing results in two protracted foreign wars, citizens increasingly told their elected representatives that they were not at all enthusiastic about committing to new military interventions to resolve crises. Consequently, today’s debates over US strategy include mostly loose, ill-defined concepts, such as ‘restraint’, ‘off-shore balancing’ and even occasionally ‘neo-isolationism’.

Lastly, decisions on American intervention in foreign conflicts continue to revolve around the constitutional argument within the US government over the war-making authority and responsibilities of the executive and legislative branches, a matter that has remained unresolved since America’s founding. This ‘invitation to struggle’, as Edward Corwin famously described it, further complicates decisions on whether, how and when to intervene. This policy dilemma was most evident last year when Capitol Hill and the White House explored appropriate responses to the Syrian regime’s alleged use of chemical weapons.3

The context for the US government’s response to the strategic challenges posed by the Syrian civil war and Russian efforts to destabilise and dominate Ukraine is therefore provided by four key factors: the absence of a coherent and consistent national-security strategy; domestic fiscal concerns; doubts about the benefits of intervention, given the steep costs; and uncertainty about who in government holds authority for the decision to intervene. These factors also help shape other important American decisions on security policy. The current downsizing and restructuring of the US armed forces, for example, includes comparatively larger cuts to the size of the army than the navy, air force or marine corps. The decisions on how best to restructure America’s military forces have been premised on
the decreasing likelihood of the US fighting another extended expedi- 

tionary ground campaign in the short or medium term.

II

The bitter experiences of waging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also 

conditioned the thinking of American political leaders contemplating mili-

tary interventions of similar purpose and potential scope. Based upon my 

two military tours of duty and one diplomatic posting in Afghanistan over 

the past decade, I can point to at least five interrelated lessons that US 

policymakers are drawing both from that long war and the Iraq campaign. 

Firstly, while it may be true that the establishment of a representative 

democracy is the ideal way to ensure that a previously failed or pariah 

state can reliably administer responsible sovereignty to its people and ter-

ritory, we should remember that this is merely an aspiration. It provides us 

with neither the means nor even a roadmap for getting there. In terms of 

development, it is, after all, a very long way from Kabul to Copenhagen. 

My colleague at Stanford University, Stephen Krasner, has summarised 

three theories of development that might guide our way: modernisation 

theory, institutional-capacity theory, and elite competition and bargai-

ning theory. Modernisation theory assumes that once you are on the upward 

escalator, you just keep going up. Institutional-capacity theory posits that 

social and political institutionalisation is key to promoting modernisation. 

Accordingly, you can get on the escalator in Zimbabwe in 1985, but you 

might find yourself worse off come 2014. Elite competition and bargain-

ning theory argues that institutions will improve the welfare of society as a 

whole only if elites are beholden to a broad base of social support. In other 

words, you can get on the escalator in France in 1789, but where you will 

be when you get off, only God knows.

No one theory is compelling or dominant. We know that organisational 

forms of liberal democracy are relatively easy to transfer, but the substance 

and culture of institutions are not. We also know that every liberal democ-

racy follows its own development trajectory. So, intervening with the hope 

of transforming a conflict-riven, underdeveloped country from anarchy or 

despotic rule to an accountable democratic state is comparable to high-risk
venture-capital investment, except that state transformations are infinitely more complex and the outcomes are far more difficult to predict.

It is sheer hubris to assert with a high degree of confidence that the hoped-for transformation will occur. At great expense, America applied all three development theories in Afghanistan over 12 years, and, even now, the outcomes remain in doubt. The lesson that can be drawn here is that, if any part of an intervention’s success is dependent on sociopolitical and economic transformation, then one must be realistic from the outset about its chances for even modest success.

Secondly, when setting the level of ambition, one must consider the time and resources available, and the probable sustainability of the enterprise. In Afghanistan, at least until 2009, there was an assumption on the ground that the mission would continue into the distant future. As a result, efforts to build institutions were often unconstrained and overly ambitious. This applied to attempts to build and strengthen the army, the national police, provincial-government capacity, the banking system and the rule of law, among others.

Sun Tzu once wrote that ‘there has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited.’ At some point after their nation has embarked upon a long and costly war, voters and their representatives will arrive at this same conclusion. A sound strategy must take this inevitable public awakening into account. When helping a war-torn, conflict-prone society recover, it is paramount to consider the organic fiscal and institutional sustainability of arrangements after foreign forces return home, which will often be sooner than those on the ground would prefer. A viable intervention thus requires planning for an exit even before arriving.

The third lesson is closely related to the second. It involves the search for a post-intervention political equilibrium. Intervening powers usually believe there will be a linear two-step process: firstly, defeat the regime against which the intervention is aimed; secondly, help create a new government. In fact, the defeat of the regime can create an entirely new dynamic of conflict within a country that can confound efforts to achieve political stability. We saw this in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, in Afghanistan, the singular focus on the Taliban has obscured the fact that,
for many decades, the primary source of insecurity has been the absence of national political reconciliation. The Taliban are merely a recent symptom of a larger and deeper problem.

The fourth lesson concerns the role of major and regional powers in ensuring stability after the withdrawal of the intervening force. The prospects for the establishment and maintenance of peace in a weak, conflicted state are greatly reduced if there is no agreement among relevant external parties to act in concert in respecting the sovereignty, and guaranteeing the security, of the state. The lack of such unity is particularly acute in Afghanistan. Trying to build such a consensus prior to intervention is preferable, but establishing one after intervention is essential.

Lastly, it should be understood that, at the point at which a government decides to intervene militarily, opportunity costs begin to rise exponentially. Sending armed forces into combat is expensive, and quickly becomes the dominant domestic political issue, amplified daily by the media.

The time and attention of key policymakers are precious commodities. As the US ambassador in Kabul, I was struck by how consumed Washington had become with not only matters of policy and strategy in Afghanistan, but also with operations and tactics. While gratified that the US Embassy and military command were the objects of such attention, I also worried about what was being neglected in the rest of the world.

III

The overarching lesson that Americans seem to draw from Afghanistan and Iraq is one of caution and scepticism regarding future military interventions: look before you leap.

Still, we should not overemphasise the influence of today’s context, which will certainly change as America’s threat perceptions and politico-economic conditions continue to evolve. However, we should also not underestimate how the consequences of the past decade of warfare have affected contemporary American attitudes about intervention.

America’s decisive shift away from favouring military intervention is clearly reflected in the way in which it chose to respond to the uprising
that toppled the government in Libya during the Arab Spring, as well as in the way in which it has implemented rounds of negotiations and sanctions as it attempts to mitigate, and ultimately resolve, the ongoing crises in Syria and Ukraine.

Neither Syria’s civil war nor Ukraine’s territorial dispute with Russia is likely to be the last such challenge to invite outside intervention. But the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance issued by the Obama administration is clear on how American strategy is shifting towards using diplomacy and negotiation to help mitigate conflicts and avoid armed interventions. Even when some type of hard-power solution to foreign internal disorder is required, limited counter-terrorist strikes using intelligence assets, drones or special-operations forces are increasingly preferred to the mobilisation of multiple divisions to wage wars.

While it remains clear that the use (or threat) of force is sometimes necessary to prevent or mitigate a dispute, the past decade has demonstrated to the American people that armed expeditions often come with great costs and unintended consequences. Moreover, force does not guarantee the achievement of the desired ends in a timely fashion, if at all.

In the case of Afghanistan, it could be argued that intervention, while far from achieving all of its intended goals, did accomplish many positive things. More than eight million Afghan children, almost 40% of whom are girls, now attend school. The problem, though, is assessing the strategic benefits derived from such accomplishments. This is because, in the greater scheme of things and however hard it is to admit, the US is simply not serving a vital and urgent national-security interest by expending vast amounts of its finite military power and fiscal resources to ensure that those children go to school.

Conditions can and do exist that lend themselves to the possibility of successful military intervention. But the decision to send in the troops should be approached with caution and due consideration of the costs, benefits, justification and possible unintended consequences.
The American Calculus of Military Intervention

Notes


