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The Militarization of Foreign Policy

Pass the Ammo!

by MICHAEL BRENNER

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The militarization of American foreign policy is an accomplished fact. ‘Security’ is the term used promiscuously to characterize whatever challenges to the nation’s well-being are out there – or perceived as existing. The seeming imperative to protect that “security“ instinctively points us toward coercive force as the answer. Hostile jihadist groups anywhere in the world, anxieties among our Sunni Arab allies in the Persian Gulf about their political stability of their regimes, unrest around the periphery of the Sahara or the Horn of Africa, insurrection in Pakistan, unpredictable conditions in energy rich Central Asia¹, the ever active drug cartels of Latin America? The habitual first, and often last resort is military action or military deployment. An extraordinary record of failure chalked up by our efforts does nothing to alter the thinking or slow the momentum behind this reliance on military assets. Strategic dogma has hardened into something that more closely resembles faith – faith impervious to evidence or reason.

Let us take stock of these current realities. In Afghanistan, the Obama administration is pulling out all stops to ensure that we keep substantial fighting forces in that benighted country. The

Pentagon has gone so far as to suggest that, if necessary, we will bypass President Hamid Karzai and find some extra-constitutional authority to sign the requisite documents. Purposes and justifications remain opaque to the point of invisibility. The main aim supposedly is to secure the regime that we placed in power against the Taliban and/or chaos like that in the early 1990s which followed in the wake of the Soviets departure. The obvious skeptical question that arises is how we expect to achieve that objective with 15,000 troops plus mercenaries when we were unable to do so with 150,000 troops plus more mercenaries. Clearly we can't – as last week's Estimate by the National Intelligence Council belatedly admitted.¹ But, it is claimed, we need those forces supplemented by airbases to continue attacks against: “terrorists,” the Taliban, the 40 or 50 al-Qaeda allegedly still somewhere in the Hindu Kush, and other dangerous people like the Haqqani network (a former American client).

Since there is no expectation of success in eradicating them all, that means a military campaign of some sort forevermore. This despite the awkward fact that no attack against the United States outside of Afghanistan has been planned or conducted from there for a decade or more. In other words, a major military force is required to cope with a threat that currently is non-existent.

If we are genuinely worried about all these potential trouble-makers, why not expand efforts to negotiate an understanding with the Taliban *et al*? Aren't we in principle already committed to doing that? How can we reinvigorate the very preliminary talks that have been held at the same time as we are contravening one of their “red lines” by committing ourselves to a military occupation indefinitely? Like all attempts to square the circle, the exercise evokes more curiosity about the mentality of whomever is making the effort than in the chances of success. In this case, the explanation lies in the relative ease and simplicity of deploying military force as compared to the arduousness of intricate, multi-party diplomacy with persons and a culture we don't understand. Hence, convenience, accustomed behavior and confidence in the American can-do ethic carries the day.

The same holds for Pakistan. The Obama administration is dedicated to drone strikes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Northwest Pakistan proper (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province) for pretty much the same reasons that it wants to hang on in Afghanistan. There is the added complication of the semi-autonomous Lashkar-e-Taiba whose aim is to topple the Islamabad government by means of terrorist violence and a relentless propaganda campaign. They are indeed dangerous; the Pakistani government is combating them with mixed results. Counter-insurgency suffers, though, from the deep resentment of all Pakistanis over our drone attacks and the overweening American presence in the area generally. Despite *Lashkar-e-*

Taiba's single focus on the near target in Islamabad, Washington insists that it is a threat to the United States that demands no attenuation of our military strategy in the borderlands and next door in Afghanistan. That elicits sympathy for *Lashkar-e-Taiba* while raising the domestic political costs for an all-out crackdown by Pakistani authorities. Another circle being squared for purposes that seemingly have little to do with American security *per se*. Are we engaged in an unacknowledged open-ended war against *Salafist* Islam everywhere in all its manifestations? If set on that dubious course, why have we chosen the least appropriate weapon for fighting it? 3

United States Special Representative for 'AFPAK' James Dobbins has pronounced those countries as having the world's highest concentration of terrorist groups.⁴ That alleged fact is cited as compelling reason to occupy the one and to raid the other. He gave no specifics as to the groups' objectives, capabilities, local circumstances, targets or make-up. In Washington policy circles, slapping the label "terrorist" on someone or some entity is implicitly taken without question as carrying deep meaning. A major American national interest and a need to eliminate the 'threat' to it are then simply assumed. Frankly speaking, this is a mockery of how a serious threat assessment and policy-making process should be conducted.

Another concern feeds the keen desire to keep highly mobile forces in Afghanistan: namely, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. In the event that acute civil strife were to create the possibility of their seizure by Islamist radicals, the Pentagon has plans to preempt them. Paradoxically, our behavior re. Pakistan already has increased the odds, however low, on such an eventuality actually developing.

Other justifications for long-term bases in Afghanistan are proposed— all of a military nature. Senior Pentagon officials want them to serve as "lily pads" from which to jump into trouble spots across the vast expanse of Central and Southwest Asia.³ That includes every place from Iran to the borders of China. Iran, of course, is the country American strategists have foremost in mind. The value of Afghan bases for any conceivable mission, given our extensive employments in the Persian Gulf, is anything but self-evident. Still, when you think in strict military terms, the more assets and options the better;—Political costs pale into insignificance. This is the same reasoning that motivated us to try keeping a permanent military presence in Iraq. That persistence encouraged Nuri al-Maliki to kick us out entirely and instead to pursue a policy of aligning with Iran. `Some dreams die harder than others.

Iran's place in the security of the Persian Gulf currently is in the headlines. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and some of the principalities are upset by the promise of a *modus vivendi* between the

Washington and Tehran deriving from a prospective resolution of the nuclear dispute. They, like Israel, prefer a confrontational stance – perhaps including a military assault against the IRI. We are taking their expressed concerns at face value. Our response has been to foster an institutionalizing of military cooperation among our allies there backed by American commitments to their defense. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel was hurried to the Gulf for that very purpose in the second week of December. Lots of documents signed and pledges made. Missing was any serious effort on our part to nurture a conception of the region's longer term security that might involve a reasonable, legitimate place for Iran. Doing so is a lot harder than talking about arms sales and defense pacts. Too, it is a lot simpler to paint the Iranian threat in military terms rather than to focus on the dangers to the Sunni Arabs' autocratic regimes posed by a combination of domestic dissent, and minority Shi'ite populations who are routinely exploited and oppressed.

Simultaneously, Secretary of State John Kerry was back in Israel accompanied by retired General John Allen (recently ISAF commander in Afghanistan) on a mission to convince the Israelis that a denatured, quasi-sovereign Palestine would pose no military threat to the country's security. They brought with them a copious trove of maps and graphs. This latest futile effort to breath life into the corpse of a two-state peace deal totally missed the mark since implacable resistance in Jerusalem has nothing whatsoever to do with worries over military matters. *Have Power Point, have general– will travel.*

The same holds for Yemen – in spades. There, the Obama people have tied American interests to the fragile autocratic rule of General Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi whom we backed as a pliable successor to the ousted log time dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. Hadi had been his Vice-President. Saleh was literally firebombed out office in the Yemeni Arab Spring. He was given sanctuary by Washington on the Upper Side of Manhattan in gratitude for past services rendered – the same services that he rendered the Soviets for many years before his epiphany of enlightenment that occurred by chance shortly after the collapse of the USSR. Saleh also provided unqualified backing for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Multiple insurrections of a sectarian, tribal and ideological nature (including a self-styled al-Qaeda franchise) leave Hadi vulnerable amidst deteriorating economic conditions. The American response? Drone attacks against alleged terrorists that alienate segments of the local population. The killing of fifteen members of a wedding party on December 11, which the NSA and CIA in their electronic omniscience identified as a convoy of terrorists, punctuated the self-defeating nature of foreign policy by all-purpose military action rather crudely applied by unthinking policy-makers.

Let us not forget Iraq – now once again on the brink of full-blown civil war. Prime Minister Nouri Maliki, Washington’s preferred man after the election of 2005, since as United States Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad said, “[Maliki’s] reputation is as someone who is independent of Iran.” After showing us the door, and knitting closer ties to Tehran, he undertook to build personal power applied to ensconce Shi’ite dominance of Iraqi public affairs and mover to systematically weaken the minority Sunni community in flouting pledges of conciliation. Mass protest demonstrations provoked the government to deploy security forces to suppress them. At the same time, violent *salafist* groups (some linked to al-Qaidi) have returned the country to a state of sectarian strife. Their cause, and their numbers, have been strengthened by their melding into the Syrian conflict. The Islamic State of Iraq & Syria (ISIS), now transcends the formal border between the two countries. Last week they marshalled enough manpower to seize parts of Ramadi and Fallujah. They are encouraged by the disaffection from the government of the Sunni tribal leaders whose Saw’ah (Awakening) movement had uprooted al-Qaidi in Mesopotamia in 2007-2008. The tribes now find themselves caught between two enemies. A three-way civil war is now taking shape in the province. The American response? Send Maliki Hellfire missiles, Apache attack helicopters and, later on F-16 fighters. A failed strategy never dies; it gets reincarnated as foreign assistance.

The extent of the generic problems created by the militarization of the United States’ foreign relations is equally evident in the Western Hemisphere. The everlasting “war on drugs,” which predates the “war on terror” by a couple of decades, is expanding and intensifying. It’s a functional substitute for the anti-communism mania that was our foreign policy organizing principle during the Cold War. In Mexico, the Obama White House has stepped up pressure on Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto to allow drones to operate along and across the border. We also are seeking approval for Special Forces to take on the drug cartels. Washington already administers much of the bureaucratic apparatus that runs the Mexican part of the WOD. Farther south, the United States has backed a rightist junta in Honduras that ousted a democratically elected reformist government and last month kept itself in power via a rigged election a la Karzai. We see these elements as more dedicated allies in fighting the drug dealers. For example, they allow the omnipresent American Special Forces to lead jungle raids. Results to date are an *expansion* of drug trafficking and the transformation of Honduras’ second city of San Pedro Sula into the world’s new murder capital – overtaking Baghdad, Mogadishu, Juarez and New Orleans.

The model for our Honduran strategy is Colombia where endless drug fueled insurrections continue with much of the dealing and mayhem perpetrated or supported by American sponsored

counter-insurgency forces. (The Mexican Los Zetas, too, were founded by a core leadership of ex-elite commandos whose skills were refined at Fort Bragg). The fight against the notorious Medellin and Cali cartels took on characteristics of a civil war as the FARC Marxist guerillas gained a piece of the drug action – the cartels making and breaking alliances with both sides. Far right para-military units formed to contest them. Most notorious was *Muerte a Secuestradores-MAS* (“Death to Kidnappers”) led by Carlos Castano – a cattle baron who was trained as a commando *jefe* by the Israelis. He had declined an invitation from the Pentagon to be similarly schooled in the United States. Castano’s first act upon returning to Colombia was to exterminate the inhabitants of a village in the vicinity of where FARC rebels had kidnapped and murdered his father.

Other units have now supplanted MAS as the drug war protagonists have morphed into several incarnations. Washington backed conservative governments in Bogota have had various veiled dealings with the murder squads via the official armed forces. The consensus view is that those far-right para-militaries are the main perpetrators of the atrocities that have marked the country’s civil strife. Approximately three million Columbians, mainly indigenous peoples, have been displaced by the government as part of its strategy “to empty the pool in which the guerillas swim.” The cattle, the vigilantes – and the drugs – now roam freely.

Elite elements of the Colombian Army and Navy themselves have been trained and advised by U.S. Special Forces under terms of an accord known as *Armed Forces Directive No. 200-05/91*. It was revealed in December³ that the agreement covered an unprecedented range of programs.⁵ Colombian units were given specialized training in the near entire arsenal of American intelligence capabilities. They also received high-tech “smart bombs” and access to drones to be used in identifying and assassinating FARC leaders. Over the ensuing twelve years, the aid is valued at more than \$10 billion. As early as 2003, U.S. involvement in Colombia encompassed 40 U.S. agencies and 4,500 people, including contractors, all working out of the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, then the largest U.S. embassy in the world until mid-2004 by Afghanistan.

American Special Forces were not permitted to engage in direct combat. That restriction, though, did not apply to an array of “contractors.” Four “contractors’ were in a plane that was shot down and crashed across the border in Ecuador – creating a regional crisis as a rescue operation infringed on Ecuadorian territory. Currently, the Pentagon is seeking basing rights to deal with unspecified contingencies as might arise from Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia – all ‘leftist’ led democracies.

What is the justification for this massive military involvement in Colombia? What American national interests warrant it? Geo-political considerations focus on FARC which seeks to overthrow the government in the name of some Marxist derivative ideology and is hostile to the United States. This may have had some larger strategic meaning back in the Cold War days when *Fidelismo* was taken as tantamount to internationalism Communism. Since 1990, though, it is manifestly a local phenomenon derivative of Colombian conditions and inextricably tied to the country's continuing economic *cum* racial conflicts between established interests and poorer segments of the population. What of the War on Drugs itself? FARC was never a principal player although there was some intersection at times. In fact, the insurgency and counter-insurgency together probably aggravated the situation by creating opportunity and incentive for the cartels to play off government security units and the rebels.

Then there is "terror." It is no coincidence that the great expansion of the American military presence in Latin America coincided with the GWOT. There was no connection, of course, between Colombia and al-Qaeda or the broader phenomenon of Islamic violence. But the adrenalin was pumping through the United States' security system. Military and intelligence resources were exploding. New means were being created. Counter-insurgency was all the rage. "Terrorist" as a label could be applied to an enormous range of unpleasant people. It became like "The Evil One" was to the Medieval mind – especially the mind of the Church and its enforcers. Scary, omnipresent, more felt than seen but available for all manner of purposes. So for good measure, Washington periodically sets off a signal flare that "terrorists" (usually Iranians) have been detected consorting with local bad guys. Smoke.

Outcome? Colombia today remains the world's biggest producer and exporter of cocaine. Afghanistan is the world's biggest producer and exporter of opium (90% of total world production).

The Security Mania

The obsession with supposed threats to American security that are either exaggerated, fanciful or originate in the United States itself (drugs) generates a free floating fear among Americans that is exploited to support policies that are as ineffective as they are thoughtless. They all center on the application of military force – the macho option for a populace addicted to violent video games. They all denigrate diplomacy and politics. They all aim at or lead to autocratic and non-democratic regimes solidifying their hold on power. That outcome, in turn, erodes American moral and political influence further. The military option thus becomes all the more attractive as

the only as well as the last resort. Odds on failure lower as a result. Time to put the military app on *pause*.

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Notes.

1 As reported in *The New York Times* December 26, 2013

2. Testimony of James F. Dobbins, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Remarks Submitted for the Record to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Washington, DC December 10, 2013

3. An authoritative, closely reasoned analysis of these issues is provided by former Pakistani Ambassador Akbar Ahmed in *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam* (Brookings, 2913).

4. The **New Silk Road** is the romantic name given a newfound American vision for making Afghanistan the linchpin for an economically integrated Central Asia that serves as a transit area between Europe and East Asia. This chimera, dreamed up by Hillary Clinton's Public Affairs sloganeers, is more excuse for hanging on in Afghanistan than serious strategy. Can camels and caravans be reincarnated as rail networks and energy pipelines? Actually, the answer is "yes." But the uncomfortable reality is that it already is being done by the Chinese. Their economy, their financing, their technology and their political initiative are transforming the region. Russia and Japan play secondary roles. The projects by-pass Afghanistan. Uncle Sam is not welcome as a modern day Marco Polo – unless he is willing to accept the role of a privileged retainer who helps Kublai Khan mount his horse.

5. See the extensive, highly detailed investigative report in the *Washington Post* December 22, 2013.