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The costly errors of America's wars

By Michael Shank

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After ten years, \$4tn and thousands of lives, the US needs an exit from the depressing impasse of its militarised foreign policy

This month, as the Pentagon and the CIA countenance a changing of the guard – welcoming Defence Secretary Leon Panetta and CIA Director David Petraeus, respectively – it is worth pressing pause on national security strategy before our modus operandi becomes any more politically disconcerting, morally disheartening and financially devastating. With Washington now waging war, in some form, in six Muslim countries – Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen – there are several trends now prevalent in our foreign policy-making that must be reformed posthaste.

First, it has become standard to engage in wars with no measurable objectives and no explicit or quantifiable goals. This is true in Iraq, where we still have 50,000 troops; in Afghanistan, where we will still have 70,000 troops at the end of 2012 (or until 2014, as incoming Defence Secretary Panetta has suggested); and in Pakistan, Libya, Yemen and now Somalia, four countries in which we've dramatically increased air strikes and drone attacks. With no measurable goal, it becomes hard to employ the right strategy. In Afghanistan, the defence department creates a new strategy on a near-annual basis.

We have tried everything under the sun, from counter-insurgency to counter-terrorism. In the first few years after our 2001 invasion, we provided monies and munitions to anyone who wanted to help us, irrespective of their warlord status or corrupt official behaviour. Then, we

transitioned to Kabul and focused, for a brief bit, on centralising our nation-building – to no avail. Now, we're back in the Afghan villages providing local leaders with monies and munitions while calling it the Afghan Local Police, ignoring the failure of a similar programme in Iraq, the Sunni Awakening. The Sunni Iraqis – or "Sons of Iraq", as the US dubbed the paramilitary force – who participated in a similar scheme, receiving monies and munitions to fight al-Qaida, are now upset that their US support has dried up and they have no political power to show for it. Meanwhile, bombing continues in Baghdad.

Second, we have blindly paid the incredible costs our wars have entailed, which a Brown University study released last month, estimates at \$3.7tn for the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Our military presence – to say nothing of our reconstruction and stabilisation expenses – costs the American taxpayer a whopping \$1m per soldier per year. We'll spend almost \$120bn in Afghanistan in 2011 alone. Recently, the nonpartisan congressional budget office noted that ending our current wars would save the American taxpayer over \$1.4tn – a much greater impact on discretionary spending than the millions in aid to poor women and children in the US, which Republicans are trying to eliminate.

Why are our wars so costly? Despite the Pentagon-friendly Rand Corporation citing policing, intelligence and negotiations as the most effective strategies in ending or dismantling 84% of terrorist movements, we continue to rely on heavy military and air presence, including big-ticket items like the \$40bn Joint Strike Fighter. These strategies are ineffective against increasingly mobile and amorphous groups. Why the reliance? Because the defence industry has built operations in every state and almost every congressional district, and because its lobby is extremely powerful in Washington. We should pursue what Rand suggests and build capacity in many more countries at a fraction of the cost.

Third, it is now the norm for defence and development contractors to profit mightily off these wars. In war after US war, cases abound regarding fraud, corruption, kickback schemes and bribery, and, more generally, completely ineffective reconstruction and stabilisation strategies, which do more to escalate insecurity and exacerbate conflict than provide stability. Nevertheless, they face little accountability and oversight at home.

Despite reprimands from the wartime contracting commission and convictions by the various inspectors general throughout the defence and state departments, the culture of corruption continues among our contractors. Washington must root out corruption, end war-profiteering by US contractors and ensure that American taxpayer dollars are spent efficiently and effectively abroad. Most of all, we must restore America's faith in how we spend our hard-earned dollars, be it in Afghanistan or Angola, Iraq or Indonesia, Libya or Lesotho.

The status quo will not keep America secure – or any other country we've invaded, for that matter. These norms undermine foreigners' faith in our ability to help rebuild their countries, undermine the American public's faith that we care at all about rebuilding our own nation, and undermine America's fiscal security, especially at a time when every federal dollar is being counted, cut or cashed in.

Now, with ten years of war behind us, we must redirect our foreign policy – before it becomes morally, politically and financially bankrupt.