

Use of Military Force: Can the US Get It Right?

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Washington's failure to act forcefully in Syria and other limited-risk situations will only fuel chaos in the Middle East.

The United States is at a turning point, as events call into question its ability to conduct combat operations, even those that are limited and justified. This came to a head in late summer, when the United States hesitated to conduct limited strikes against Syria, a major, perhaps historic error even if Syria's chemical weapons are removed by the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. If the United States does not get the use of force right, we will keep making two mistakes fatal to international security: waging costly, futile wars of choice to change regimes; and refusing to use limited military force even when necessary.

In a world without an effective collective security system, the United States is the ultimate arbiter of order and peace. As President Obama stressed in his 2009 Oslo Speech: "The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens." But to maintain public support, military actions must make sense, and dodge serious risks.

Over the last 70 years, our record of doing so is mixed. American forces have engaged in at least 24 conflicts, from major wars such as Korea to brief conflicts such as Kosovo. Most were successful, but seven were not (Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, Korea, Somalia, Beirut 1983, and the Tehran hostage rescue). Those seven involve four of our five major wars since 1945 (Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan, and Iraq), and account for about 98 percent of US combat casualties since World War II, trillions of dollars in US funds often squandered, and political leaders being punished, from Harry Truman to the GOP in 2006. Why such outcomes?

All were attempts to move territories from "unfriendly or disputed" to "friendly" status by deploying ground forces. Each met violent resistance from inside and outside. And all except North Korea involved insurgencies, engendering their own intractable nation-building problems. Given that each was a "war of choice" for America, and not essential to its security, US public support eventually collapsed.

So why do we keep repeating the "regime change" mistake? Our concept of a US-led, liberal international system assumes all nations should be liberal democracies. And if these nations don't adopt that system of government on their own, we sometimes are tempted to nudge them in that direction with our guns.

Furthermore, from Saddam's Iraq to North Korea, we faced despicable regimes that violated our deepest values, and called out for us to act. But we must avoid these temptations unless the criteria of the "Powell Doctrine" is met -- core interests are in play; there is a clear, winnable mission; there is public support; and there is no non-military alternative.

There is a second threat flowing from such wars of choice; when they go wrong, we look at other conflicts and tend to avoid any military action whatsoever, regardless if it is vital to our interests, or extraordinarily limited in risk and forces committed.

Yet limited, usually low-risk military actions are necessary to maintain international security, and we thus have conducted scores, including Bosnia, the 1987-'88 Iran conflict, Cuba 1963, Grenada, Libya, and Berlin from 1947 through the 1960s.

Our ability to carry out these building blocks of global security are endangered when, appalled by wars of choice gone wrong, we conflate necessary and limited engagements with them, as seen after Vietnam and again now. Congress balked repeatedly in the 1970s and 1980s at almost any military action, and came close to voting down authorization for the Gulf War in 1991. Even President Obama sometimes encourages this. In June, he stated "it would be very easy to slip-slide your way into deeper and deeper commitments [in Syria]."

But worse, by going to Congress on Syria, when not even the War Powers Act required an immediate congressional vote, he signaled that the contemplated strike rose to the gravitas of a major war of choice, requiring congressional and public support, as with Iraq in 1991 and 2002. But when decisions on limited military action are punted to the public and Congress, both usually fear that the decision involves major war and likely will vote no.

This happened not only with Syria, but in early 1998 when the Clinton administration sought public support for a strike against Iraq. Clinton, however, learned from his failure to act, and within a year struck Iraq, helping end Saddam's WMD programs, and liberated Kosovo, both without a direct combat casualty, or asking Congress. Today our failure to act forcefully in Syria and elsewhere is fueling that region's chaos. Will President Obama learn Clinton's lesson?

Ambassador James F. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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