

America's Failed Approach to Chaos Theory: The Complexity Crisis in U.S. Strategy

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April 16, 2015

The United States now faces a rapidly evolving world filled with new challenges at a time when real-world defense planning is focused on budget cuts, when U.S. "strategy" lacks plans and program budgets, and when talk of strategic partnership lacks clear and specific direction. Far too much U.S. strategic rhetoric is a hollow shell, while the real U.S. national security posture is based on suboptimizing the budget around the fiscal ceilings set by the Budget Control Act (BCA), persisting in issuing empty concepts and strategic rhetoric, and dealing with immediate problems out of any broader strategic context.

The end result resembles an exercise in chaos theory. Once one looks beyond the conceptual rhetoric, the reality is a steadily less coordinated set of reactions to each ongoing or new crisis: the strategic equivalent of the "butterfly effect." To paraphrase Edward Lorenz, the chaos theorist who coined the term, "the present state determines a series of changes and uncertain adjustments in U.S. force postures and military actions in spite of the fact the approximate present does not approximately determine the future.

Put more simply, the United States has no clear strategy for dealing with Russia and Asia and is reacting tactically to the immediate pressures of events in the Middle East and Afghanistan without any clear goals or direction. Worse, these military tactical reactions are steadily more decoupled from the need to create an integrated civil-military strategy: Grab any short-term form of "win" and ignore the need to "hold" and build."

The World and Reality Are Outpacing U.S. Strategy, Planning, Programming, and Budgeting

Part of problem is the lack of past preparation for some of today's greatest challenges. No one has really prepared for the speed of China's emergence as a regional and world power, for the impacts of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, for the emergence of a global struggle for the future of Islam and the upheavals in the Arab world that began in 2011, for Russia's unexpected invasion of the Ukraine—all of which are interacting with a global recession and constant changes in technology. All are made worse for the United States by the sheer irrational dysfunctionality of sequestration and the BCA.

The world is suddenly far more complex, sometimes to the point where no effort in dealing with complex theory can really help. It is filled with very different major regional challenges and with restructuring the use of force into new forms of asymmetric warfare, roles for nonstate actors, and combinations of military threats and political actions. In some ways, it is a much harder world to deal with than U.S. strategists and planners had faced in the past.

There is something faintly absurd in feeling any form of nostalgia for the Cold War, but at least there was a certain element of focus and simplicity and definable, practical sets of strategic options. The growing complexity of the various struggles the United States now faces have all the focus and simplicity of a kaleidoscope, and it is unclear that the United States and its allies have any clear strategic options that offer a credible response to a series of steadily growing challenges.

Russia, Ukraine, and the Rebirth of Europe's Strategic Challenge

The simplest challenge so far is Russia and Ukraine, but "simple" is a very relative term in today's world. The invasion of Crimea that Russia began in February 2014 put an end to the U.S. assumption that it could somehow focus on other parts of the world. The strategic situation has grown steadily more complex as Russia has pushed deeper into Ukrainian territory, creating new hostile world views like its Color Revolution and challenging the United States and Europe in other areas.

It is unclear where Russia intends to stop its invasion of Ukraine and unclear that U.S. and European actions put forth thus far can halt the series of slow, slicing Russian gains. Sanctions have not halted Russia in Ukraine or deterred it from posing potential new challenges in the Baltic, Central Asia, and Middle East. NATO has so far done little to create a new deterrent to Russia, focusing on a “2 percent solution” for increasing member country defense spending whose strategic objective is unclear and has little chance of being reached.

Once one looks beyond the reassuring words and rhetoric of NATO Ministerials and defense statements by member countries, and looks for actual substance, it is unclear what the United States intends to do, much less the NATO alliance as a whole. The United States has not announced any clear force plan for Europe, and NATO has never announced what the “two percent solution” would buy or why it would be important.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania remain exposed. Two non-NATO powers—Sweden and Finland—face their own challenges in the Baltic. The new “Central Region” of NATO has not shown how a key state like Germany would really support states like Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary—all of which have so far shown a striking lack of unity.

Creating small NATO power projection forces seems largely symbolic and of little real deterrent or warfighting value. Britain and France have cut defense spending notably faster than the United States. As for the new southern flank, the military and strategic future of Spain, Portugal, Italy, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey can be politely described as a divided set of national “mysteries.”

Rebalancing to Asia or Simply to the Latest Area of Need?

The U.S. “rebalancing” to Asia has had some success in creating stronger regional partnerships in Southeast Asia, but it has not yet produced any clear force improvement plan—or any kind of force plan at all—for U.S. forces. It is far from clear that there will be any real increase in U.S. forces given the pressures of other areas and the ongoing cuts in the U.S. force posture driven by cost escalation and the BCA.

Worse, the real gains coming from stronger partnerships with nations like Australia have been more than offset by the growing tensions between Japan and South Korea and China’s skillful exploitation of those tensions. China now seems to be becoming equally skillful in applying salami divide-and-conquer tactics to Vietnam and the other states in Southeast Asia and is steadily expanding its power projection capability in the Pacific. It is also offering a steadily more sophisticated blend of pressure over the South China Sea with economic negotiations, while it steadily builds up its sea and air power.

China is playing a long game that may well be more based on competition with the United States and its neighbors than actually posing a threat. *But*—as is the case with Russia—the United States seems to be relying on concepts and rhetoric that lack tangible plans and create no coherent response. If one asks what overall strategy links the United States with Japan, South Korea, and most of its other partners in Asia, what the force plans and force improvement plans are, and how the end result is to create a more stable and secure Asia, the answer seems to be that good intentions are enough to pave the road to success.

Complexity and Chaos in the Threat Posed by Nonstate Actors

The broader strategic challenges in Europe and Asia are currently overshadowed at the tactical level by the more immediate—and steadily growing—challenges in dealing with nonstate actors, especially jihadist violence and growing instability in the Islamic world. The end result is a complex and interacting series of crises centered in the Middle East and North Africa, but that extends far more broadly into Asia and the rest of the Islamic world.

“Terrorism” is only part of the story. These interactive crises include major rivalries and arms races between regional powers, insurgencies and civil wars, and the risk of a nuclear arms race and other forms of high-technology proliferation.

Nothing about the U.S. “war on terrorism,” however, indicates that the United States is winning or has a strategy that takes the form of effective and coherent actions. In fact, the START global terror database used by the U.S. State Department showed a massive rise in total terrorist activity from 2010 to 2014, driven largely by developments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, and Pakistan.

The State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013* showed that incidents rose from less than 300 major incidents a year in the Middle East and North Africa region during 1998 to 2004 to approximately 1,600 in 2008. They increased again from around 1,500 in 2010 to 1,700 in 2011 and jumped to 2,500 in 2012 and 4,650 in 2013. This was a 15-fold increase in annual incidents since 2002 and a 3-fold increase since 2010. It is also brutally clear from virtually daily reporting in 2014 and early 2015 that the situation has gotten much worse.

There is little doubt that the challenge posed by violent Islamic extremism will increase in the future, and many reports provide such a warning. For example, a RAND Corporation study on trends in terrorism in 2014, led by Seth G. Jones, found a 58 percent increase in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups from 2010 to 2013 and that the number of Salafi jihadists more than doubled from 2010 to 2013, according to both RAND's low and high estimates.

All of these trends mean that the threat from violent Islamic extremism will almost certainly get worse in the near term and that jihadist violence will continue in various forms for years to come. Yet, it is important to keep these trends in perspective. They have only produced serious casualties when extremist movements have become powerful enough to trigger or exploit major insurgencies or civil wars. The strongest extremist movements still are only actively supported by a tiny portion of the population even in the nations where they are most active.

Terrorism, however, is only a relatively small part of the much broader pattern of violence, which includes new outbreaks of insurgency, civil war, and ethnic, tribal, and sectarian warfare. In Africa, there is serious military action or near civil war in Nigeria, Nigeria, Mali, and Somalia. Terrorism and violence is rising in Egypt and the Sinai, although it is limited as yet and partly driven by the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

The United States seems to rely on leading from well behind when European states like France are willing to act and to simply to wait when they are not. If the United States has a strategy beyond hope and prayer for Libya, it seems to be that the Libyan civil war will eventually burn itself out without spreading too far or causing too much humanitarian suffering.

Back to Almost War in Iraq

The United States is at war with the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL, Da'esh) in Iraq. It has been steadily building up its train and assist mission for the Iraqi Army, pursuing the so-far futile goal of creating a Sunni National Guard, and supporting the Kurdish pesh merga forces while fearing the impact on Kurdish separatism and Arab-Kurdish tensions. It is also trying to deal with Iran and Shi'ite militias and back the real-world goal of nation building in a country whose ethnic and sectarian tensions remain as much of a threat as the Islamic State and where its action inevitably risks aiding Iran.

The United States began an allied air campaign in August 2014 in which the U.S.-led coalition flew some 1,791 sorties against targets in Iraq and 1,200 air strikes against targets in Syria between August 2014 and April 5, 2015, according to data provided by USCENTCOM. Most of these strikes were in reaction to the needs of the moment: the risk of Iraqi defeats, Kurdish defeats in Syria at Kobani, humanitarian needs, and effort to aid faltering Iraq offensives like the ones at Tikrit.

If there is any overall strategy behind the use of U.S. airpower beyond such reactions, it has not been made clear in any of the unclassified reporting by USCENTCOM or the Department of Defense. The Defense Department and USCENTCOM do release a daily report on targets hit, which summarized that between August 2014 and March 31, 2015, 5,784 targets had been damaged or destroyed, including 75 tanks, 285 Humvees, 441 staging areas, 1,689 buildings, 1,166 fighting positions, 151 oil infrastructure targets, and 1,977 other targets. Unfortunately, no effort was made to show what impact, if any, the strikes had had on the Islamic State's overall fighting capabilities and political position.

In practice, the public numbers that focused on physical targets—and occasional guesstimates as to total body counts—also overlook a major debate between advocates of the strikes, who claimed they were having a major impact on the leadership of the Islamic State and other jihadist movements, and experienced intelligence and battle-damage assessment experts, who felt the impact of the strikes was limited to negligible because groups like the

Islamic State increased their concealment capability and use civilian cover and are able to adapt to the occasional loss of leaders and experts. The White House and senior command levels seemed to favor the most favorable spin, but it was far from clear such spin had broad support at the expert level.

The air effort had also been a much larger effort than the numbers of actual strikes showed. A U.S. Air Force Central Command (AFCENT) report as of March 31, 2015, showed that the United States had flown 12,649 armed strike sorties as of that date, although only 2,796, less than 25 percent, had fired any kind of weapon. The United States had also flown 4,133 additional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) sorties, plus 4,292 airlift and air drop sorties and 8,110 tanker sorties. There is no clear breakdown of these latter sorties by target country, but some 40 percent seem to have been flown in missions relating to Syria.

This air war is not cheap, although it is far cheaper than the previous fighting in Iraq. USCENTCOM reported that, “As of March 12, 2015, the total cost of operations related to ISIL since kinetic operations started on August 8, 2014, is \$1.83 billion and the average daily cost is \$8.5 million.” Other cost estimates go far higher, but they are not official, and as has been the case in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001, such estimates are never properly defined.

As for the ground war, U.S. commanders warned from the start that it might take several years to liberate Mosul, and they had never discussed what would happen if Iraq did not move toward political unity and back toward some form of economic development, or if the Islamic State was not defeated in Syria, as well as Iraq. They talked about building 12 effective Iraqi brigades without discussing the role of Iran or Shi’ite militias, described the Sunni National Guard only as provincial forces, and never described the projected scope of the train and assist mission for the pesh merga.

In practice, the United States has since reacted to events as they occurred. Arms transfers seemed to be planned and timed to suit the U.S. process rather than Iraqi need. The United States then had to try to react to events rather than develop any clear force concept and lagged badly according to Iraqi government perceptions.

Moreover, restricting most U.S. train and assist advisers away from the front meant that Iranian members of the al Quds Force and Iraqi hardline Shi’ite leaders were able to take credit for much of the limited military success that did occur and claim that the air campaign was ineffective.

It was clear that the U.S. mission and government did seek to develop some form of Iraqi political unity, improve governance, and move the country back toward development. The Iraqi central government also made far more efforts of this kind once Maliki was replaced by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, but it faced major challenges in terms of internal political divisions, Iranian pressure, Shi’ite divisions, and a lack of Sunni Arab and Kurdish support.

Iraqi forces remained weak at best. They had lost some four divisions, and more than a crop’s worth of equipment and supplies, in the fighting when the Islamic State forces took Mosul. They have suffered far more, however, from corruption, Maliki’s effort to make them a political element of his power base, being thrust into sectarian and political conflicts, and a loss of effective training efforts.

The United States responded by providing some 3,000 to 4,500 train and assist personnel, but ones that had major limits on their ability to go forward and help Iraqi forces develop real-world combat capability. Arms transfers were slow and seemingly often delivered without a clear set of priorities. The training effort was slow to take place and often lacked proper facilities or supplies. In addition, it was not scaled to the challenges involved.

Some unclassified estimates put the cut in effective forces as a drop from 280,000 to a low as 50,000, with a largely demoralized and ineffective police force with four to seven divisions that were smaller than U.S. brigades. Even high estimates put the maximum at 141,000 and 15 divisions with less than five to six effective and relatively small brigades. This force lacked effective combat and service support forces and had major supply and support problems.

A combination of airpower and the various military elements in Iraq—with Kurdish and Iranian-backed Shi’ite militias playing a critical role—was still able to halt the Islamic State advance and recover some territory. However, such gains were often little more than desert or depopulated towns and cities. Military action was uncoordinated

and sometimes seemingly led by Iran.

The Iraqi government attack on Tikrit is a grim example. It was not coordinated with the United States and initially had no U.S. or other air support. It had clear Iranian support and was launched with more Iraqi Shi'ite militia than Iraqi government troops. It only “succeeded” after the United States did provide air support, and the “liberation” of Tikrit in April 2015 left it virtually uninhabitable. Moreover, brutal reprisals by Shi'ite militias exacerbated the government's problems in gaining broader Sunni Arab support, and Iraq faced a new offensive around Ramadi even as the Iraqi and U.S. governments were celebrating the “liberation” of a ghost town.

Iraq's growing civil challenges matched its military ones and reflected equal uncertainties in U.S. strategy, a drop in world oil prices and in the value of Iraq's exports, the loss of much of its economic activity outside the Shi'ite south. The disruption caused by the fighting and terrorism have also sharply cut Iraq's revenues and ability to fund both its civil and military sectors during the course of 2014 and early 2015.

These forces helped create a potential deficit of \$22–25 billion out of a budget of only \$105 billion by mid-April 2015. It forced Iraq into trying to finance some \$5 billion in bonds and seek \$400–\$700 billion in IMF funds, and pushed Iraq into asking for previously unprogrammed U.S. military economic aid.

Maps of internally displaced persons (IDPs) covered most of the Sunni areas in Iraq, and U.S. State Department estimates put the number of IDPs without their homes, businesses, and jobs at nearly 2.7 million by early April 2015. The Iraqi GDP dropped in value in 2014 according to the CIA World Factbook, per capita income was only \$14,100 even by purchasing power parity standards, and unemployment and poverty continued to sharply increase especially in the west.

If there was some overall U.S. plan and strategy for the civil side of the fighting beyond encouraging words, it was far from apparent through Prime Minister Abadi's visit in mid-April 2015. The White House issued a statement indicating that it had offered a token \$205 million in economic aid. As was the case with the military effort in Iraq, everything seemed to be reactive and then generally too limited or uncertain to have more than limited effect. The White House stated,

The United States supports Iraq's efforts to develop an inclusive government that promotes security, prosperity and human rights for all Iraqis, and to enhance ties with its regional neighbors.

The United States is providing an additional \$205 million in humanitarian assistance to assist millions of Iraqi civilians – both refugees in the region and internally displaced persons within the country – who have been affected by ISIL attacks and previous instability, providing them with food, shelter, water, medical services, cash assistance, and other essential goods and services. It will help displaced persons and refugees obtain legal documentation, strengthen child protection, and improve management at IDP camps. With this new funding, the United States has provided more than \$407 million in humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi people since the start of fiscal year 2014.

As for that military effort, the White House issued a statement that focused on past aid without describing its impact and the real-world problems that remained,

Since the fall of 2014, the United States has delivered essential equipment to Iraq as a critical component of the coalition fight against ISIL, including: over 100 million rounds of ammunition, 62,000 small arms systems, 1,700 Hellfire missiles, and six M1A1 tanks. In addition, the U.S. provided to the Government of Iraq 250 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles in December 2014 and January 2015, 25 of which were subsequently provided to Kurdish forces in Erbil. The Peshmerga received 1,000 Anti-Tank Missiles that were delivered through the Government of Iraq. As of this week, an additional 50 MRAPs with mine rollers will be on their way to Iraq. In addition to ammunition and vehicles, the United States has also delivered over 12,000 rifles, body armor, helmets, and first aid kits – the equivalent of roughly 5-6 brigades' worth of individual soldier weapons and equipment. The United States continues to work with the Government of Iraq to deliver their F-16 fighter aircraft to Iraq, and there are currently 30 Iraqi Air Force pilots in the training pipeline.

Deliveries and donations from coalition countries have also been critical to the equipping effort. The coalition has conducted over 70 flights carrying over 5 million pounds of materiel donated by 17 countries, to support the Government of Iraq's fight against ISIL.

The \$1.6-billion Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF) has enabled the United States to provide training and equipment to the ISF, including Peshmerga troops and tribal volunteers, with strong support from coalition partners. Four Building Partner Capacity sites have been established, in Al Asad, Besmayah, Taji, and Erbil - and almost 6,500 ISF, including Peshmerga, have already completed instruction, with more than 4,900 currently in training. Additional equipment funded by ITEF has also begun to arrive in Iraq including individual soldier gear and weapons. Armored vehicles, communications systems, and other equipment and munitions to support roughly 20,000 Iraqi fighters will follow shortly.

Foreign Military Financing (FMF)—grants for the acquisition of U.S. defense equipment, services, and training—will continue to support the long-term development of ISF capabilities. Since 2013, \$771 million in FMF and more than \$2.5 million in International Military Education and Training has gone towards the development of Iraq's military. FMF has supported ISF logistics capacity building, professionalization and training, platform-specific sustainment, border security, and equipment to support Iraqi counter terrorism forces.

The United States failed to say anything detailed about Iraq's request for AH-64s or expediting delivery of the F-16 and other heavy weapons. It did not expand the official U.S. advice and assists beyond a nominal 4,500 personnel or indicate it would expand the role of such personnel to go forward and help create real combat capability.

No reassessment was made of the fact that the Iraqi National Security Forces had become even more ineffective and corrupt under Maliki than the United States had initially estimated, that Iran and the Shi'ite militias present greater problems, that Arab-Kurdish differences remained critical, and that only token progress was made in winning back Sunni support in the west.

Instead, the Obama administration issued a map in mid-April that tried to show that "ISIL can no longer operate freely in roughly 25 to 30 percent of populated areas of Iraqi territory where it once could." These areas translate into approximately 13,000 to 17,000 square kilometers (or 5,000 to 6,500 square miles).

This map was timed for Prime Minister Abadi's visit, and drawn in ways that showed far more gains than a similar map U.S.CENTCOM had issued in March that claimed that, "ISIL can no longer operate freely in roughly 20–25 percent of populated areas of Iraqi territory where they once could. These areas translate into approximately 11,000–13,500 square kilometers (4,100–5,200 square miles).

It also was an exercise in "spin" that ignored the fact much of the territory involved was not held by any force, had involved fighting in and out of areas with little population or was a desert, and used a key qualification like "operate freely" that raised serious questions as to whether the exercise had any real strategic meaning.

A Strange Kind of Sort of "Nonintervention" Fighting in Syria

The United States has flown strikes against jihadist targets in Syria as well as Iraq since August 2014, and fighting an enemy whose primary base is on Syrian territory means fighting in Syria as well as in Iraq. The nature and effectiveness of the strategy behind this U.S. military involvement, however, has been even more unclear than has been the case in Iraq.

As in Iraq, the Department of Defense has only reported the total targets damaged or destroyed in both Iraq and Syria, which consist largely of buildings, staging areas, and fighting positions. Maps of the size and target of U.S. strikes like those that BBC provides using USCENTCOM data show, however, that the majority of the air strikes flown in Syria have not been flown directly against the Islamic State. They have been flown against targets like Kobani (Cobane) to help the Syrian Kurds and other relief efforts and seem more a response to media coverage than strategic need.

The United States has never publicly explained the strategy for its air and cruise missile strikes in Syria or what they have accomplished. The Defense Department has avoided making any public assessment of their strategic or

military effect, although U.S. officers and officials have individually made guesstimates about the total number of dead fighters and have indicated in background briefings that the strikes have had an impact in killing key Islamic State and other jihadist leaders and have reduced their sources of funding and holdings of weapons.

The United States does still talk about working with other Arab allies to train some 5,000 moderate Syrian rebels, but the only faction it ever seriously aided—the somewhat ironically named Harakat Hazm or Steadfastness Front—has been effectively destroyed by the Jabat Al Nusra Front, which is tied to al Qaeda. Harakat Hazm first suffered major defeats near Idlib in November 2014 in spite of limited U.S. air support and was virtually eliminated when it lost its headquarters in Aleppo in March 2015.

Discussions about buffer zones with Turkey have not led to any more action than earlier U.S. talk about red lines relating to chemical weapons. Cooperation with various outside Arab governments has remained limited and has been as incoherent and inconsistent as the efforts of each such Arab government. Negotiations have so far failed to produce any progress. Iran and Russia continue to support Bashar al-Assad, and the rebel factions actually fighting Assad are dominated by the Islamic State, supporters of al Qaeda and less hardline jihadist groups.

The human impact of the fighting has been steadily more devastating. The United Nations and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) reported in April 2015 that Syria—with a population around 18.2 million—had 3.9 million refugees outside the country and 12.2 million at risk within it, of which 7.6 million were IDPs who had lost their homes, businesses, and jobs. Some 4.8 million Syrians were effectively under siege and had limited or no access to aid.

This has created a more explosive legacy for the future—both in Syria and in the neighboring states affected by refugees and Syrian instability—and the population of Syria also started from a far lower base of wealth than Iraq or any Gulf state. The CIA could not make reliable estimates after 2012, but the per capita income of Syria was only \$5,100 in 2011. CIA did estimate that direct unemployment rose to 33–35 percent by 2014, and underemployment would raise this percentage sharply. It had become brutally clear that economic recovery could not begin without political stability and that Syria would lag in development for a decade after that, creating the kind of conditions that help breed division and extremism in the interim.

The United States did become a major aid donor after 2011, but it had no better civil plans than military ones. The Obama administration's overall strategy seemed to be one of playing along with the efforts of Arab allies to create some effective moderate opposition, while trying to limit the aid provided to Islamist extremist elements, supporting largely meaningless token U.S.-aided training of “5,000” rebels, limiting extremist gains by bombing when such gains received serious media attention, killing key rebel leaders from the air when this seemed possible, and depriving the Islamic State of revenues and support where possible.

The U.S. aid effort remains critical, but in strategic terms, the United States now seems to rely on the hope that some mix of containment, burn out, and negotiation will someday help. Put differently, its strategy seems to consist of having no strategy for active intervention other than a bombing campaign that is focused on the Islamic State and inevitably has some indirect effect in helping the Assad regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah supporters, as well as rival jihadist groups. The administration has never addressed the issue of how Iraq could become secure, even if it took back all lost territory in Iraq, as long as the Islamic State or some other jihadist extremist group remain a major force just across the border from Iraq in Syria.

Iran: The Regional Wild Card and U.S. Strategic Partnerships with the Arab Southern Gulf States, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey

The United States may well have made real progress in negotiating some limits to Iran's nuclear weapons program. More broadly, however, the U.S. approach to Iran has achieved little more than strategic incoherence, and Iran seems to be making slow but significant gains in expanding its strategic influence:

- The United States was actively pursuing a nuclear arms control negotiation with Iran as part of a P5+1 effort. It had reached what seemed to be a promising framework agreement, but it was far from clear it could either negotiate a final agreement by an end of June deadline or overcome the objections of the U.S.

Congress and political pressure from Israel.

- As noted earlier, the United States was involved in major strategic competition with Iran for influence in Iraq, while both states were operating in parallel to try to defeat the Islamic State.
- Iran was playing a key role in supporting the Assad regime in Syria in opposition to the United States, while also supporting Hezbollah and arming it with a massive array of rockets and missiles that could be used to strike Israel (or any Arab opponent).
- Iran had provided arms and rocket materials to Hamas and the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza, compounding the problems in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and helping to trigger a new round of fighting in 2014.
- Iran was providing at least some support to Shi'ite extremist opposition movements in Bahrain.
- Iran had slowly increased its support to the Houthi Shi'ite insurgents in Yemen. The Houthis had come to effectively dominate the capital and much of the populated areas in western Yemen and threaten Aden.
- Iran was building up a major conventional ballistic missile, cruise missile, UAV/UCAV, and long-range artillery rocket threat to the Arab Gulf. This threat was serious enough for the United States to deploy ballistic missile defense ships, encourage the Arab Gulf states to buy PAC-3 missile defenses and to consider buying THAAD theater ballistic missile defenses.
- Iran was steadily building up a mix of conventional and asymmetric warfare forces that could threaten tanker traffic and a wide mix of sea and shore targets in the Arab Gulf states. These forces included submarines, submersibles, smart and dumb mines, long-range land/sea/air launched antiship missiles, antiship missile patrol boats, marine and special forces units, amphibious raid forces, and UAV/UCAVs.
- The United States had responded by sending patrol boats and mine warfare assets to the Gulf, along with a Special Forces command ship, improving its air and naval capabilities in the region, stepping up joint exercises with its Arab allies, and working with Arab Gulf states to improve their military forces with a combination of advisers and massive arms transfers. A Congressional Research Service study reported \$86.6 billion in proposed U.S. arms transfers to Saudi Arabia alone during 2010–2013.
- Iran's actions interacted with the broader and increasingly more violent struggle for the future of Islam and the growing polarization of Sunnis from Shi'ites and other sects that interacted with the growing threat of jihadist extremism. It heightened tensions in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and led to a growing confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states after the Houthi takeover of much of Yemen in March and early April 2015. It made what some had once called a clash between civilizations a growing war within Islam.

This mix of strategic competition, arms control, rising threats, and indirect cooperation in Iraq had so many conflicting elements that it again seemed to be largely reactive and without any clear strategic plan beyond achieving a framework for a nuclear arms control agreement.

USCENTCOM did seem to have a more coherent strategy for cooperation with the Arab Gulf states, but it was unclear what kind of allied Arab forces it was trying to build, what mix of U.S. and allied capabilities would result, at what cost, and over what period of time, and what level of net assessment if any had been made of the trends in the regional balance and Iranian nonnuclear military threats and gains in regional strategic influence.

It is clear that the United States has been providing major arms transfers to key allied states like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states; has increased its support to Jordan; has resumed arms transfers to Egypt; and has sought to ease the problems and tensions arising from its indecisiveness in Syria, political choices in Egypt, invasion of Iraq, and failure to keep its allies informed of the details of its nuclear negotiation with Iran.

U.S. success, however, has been mixed at best and a high level of strategic distrust remains, particularly in Egypt

and Saudi Arabia. The United States has also only had moderate impact in ending the conspiracy theories in the Arab Gulf that it was somehow turning away from its Arab alliances and planning to somehow partner with Iran. Absurd as these theories were, they were tangible indicators of the level of uncertainty in Arab perceptions of the U.S. role in the region in spite of all the U.S. actions to the contrary.

As for Turkey, the United States has damped the more public tensions and has had a considerable level of quiet cooperation at the military level. *But*, no strategy has yet emerged for broader cooperation in Syria, Iraq, or the rest of the region.

Civil War and Strategic Collapse in Yemen

To put into context how quickly the collapse of Yemen's central government came, consider that President Obama had described Yemen as a strategic model for the entire region as recently as September 10, 2014:

This counterterrorism campaign will be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist, using our air power and our support for partner forces on the ground. This strategy of taking out terrorists who threaten us, while supporting partners on the front lines, is one that we have successfully pursued in Yemen and Somalia for years. And it is consistent with the approach I outlined earlier this year: to use force against anyone who threatens America's core interests, but to mobilize partners wherever possible to address broader challenges to international order.

As late as March 25, 2015, ABC News was quoting White House press secretary Josh Earnest still stating that the United States still could “enjoy the benefits of a sustained counterterrorism security relationship with the security infrastructure that remains in Yemen,” and that, “[t]he White House does continue to believe that a successful counter-terrorism strategy is one that will build up the capacity of the central government to have local fighters on the ground to take the fight to extremists in their own country... That is a template that has succeeded in mitigating the threat that we face from extremists in places like Yemen.”

The United States has been able to continue some strikes against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, but its cooperation with Saudi Arabia in trying to create a new Yemeni government created such deep division in Yemen's Sunni political leadership and the Yemeni security forces that both collapsed. President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi had to first flee from Sanaa to Aden and then to Saudi Arabia. By March 22, 2015, the United States had had to evacuate its embassy, military trainers, and counterterrorism forces at the al-Anad air base near the city of al-Houta.

The end result was that the United States had to shift from concentrating on a counterterrorism mission against AQAP to a far broader effort to limit Houthi expansion and the potential increase in Iranian influence over Yemen. In practice, the fact the United States no longer had an active presence in Yemen meant supporting the Saudi lead in creating a military alliance of ten Sunni states including four of the five other members of the GCC (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE), as well as Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, and Pakistan.

This has been followed by a Saudi-led air campaign against the Houthi that originally seems to have been intended to force the Houthi to allow the return of Hadi, but then had to be redirected to try to contain Houthi expansion and ties to Iran while creating a naval presence that will ensure Iran cannot deploy its navy or provide military resupply by sea.

Saudi Arabia is reported to have moved some 150,000 military and security forces to the border and asked Pakistan for support in land operations in Yemen, but there is no clear indication as yet that a land campaign has actually been planned. Instead, Saudi Arabia seems to have focused on using bombing strikes to try to force the Houthi to give up their political and territorial gains while taking the lead in trying to persuade Sunni tribal elements in Yemen to unite against the Houthi.

It is far from clear that such a mix of bombs, bribes, and blockades will work. It is all too likely that the fighting in Yemen will increase the divisions between Iran and the Sunni Gulf states, the broader tensions between Sunnis and Shi'ites and other religious minorities, and create more violent extremists.

The good news for the United States is that it has seen Saudi Arabia and other key GCC states emerge as much stronger strategic partners and increased unity between them and the other key moderate Arab states that are U.S. strategic partners. The bad news is that U.S. strategy in Yemen so far seems to consist largely of being driven out and being absent.

The Not So “Good War” in Afghanistan and Pakistan

The final link in the lack of coherent, tangible U.S. strategy, plans, programs, and budgeting lies in what the Obama administration once called the “good war.” The administration has somewhat eased the timing of its withdrawal from Afghanistan, but it still has no credible plan for supporting Afghan forces, no clear strategy for supporting Afghanistan in economic terms, and no clear strategy at all for dealing with a Pakistan that is still a partial sanctuary for the Taliban and other extremists and seeing steadily rising levels of extremist violence in the rest of the country.

In spite of the visit of Afghanistan’s new president to Washington, the United States has not shown it has an effective strategy for Afghan transition, is willing to aid Afghanistan on a conditions-based level, or has a broader strategy for Pakistan and Central Asia. It has systematically downplayed the rise in Afghan civil and security force casualties reported by the United Nations, and expansion of insurgent areas of influence reported by the United Nations and German and other intelligence agencies.

It has not publicly addressed warnings by figures like the Afghan interior minister Noor-ul-Haq Ulumi that have been reported in the *Washington Post*. Ulumi warned in April that 11 Afghan provinces faced high security threats and an additional 9 faced medium-level threats. He also warned that Pakistan’s offensive against its own Taliban in North Waziristan was creating a major new threat and pushing insurgents into Afghanistan. “The foreigners are behind the recent insecurity in the country.”

The United States has not reacted to the economic warnings of World Bank and IMF analysts. It has not succeeded in helping the Afghan government create anything like a full range of ministers and provincial and district officials as part of the new government. Moreover, the United States does not provide enough train and assist military personnel to effectively cover all of Afghanistan’s corps, much less provide help to its combat unit Kandaks and police.

The administration’s decision to keep some 9,800–10,800 military personnel in country has not been tied to any assessment of requirements and impact and must be kept in the perspective that many are needed simply to support and protect U.S. operations. NATO reported that only 6,839 U.S. military personnel had actually been assigned directly to participate in the Resolute Support Mission as of February 18, 2015, and that two other key train and assist countries were providing low numbers: Germany some 850 and Italy some 500. The entire total—which included some 40 countries, many of which had contingents too small and too subject to national caveats to really be effective—now totaled around 13,195.

Dealing with the Complexity Crisis in U.S. Strategy

There are no simple or easy ways to deal with the sheer complexity of U.S. strategic needs, and none of the key work in shaping real-world plans and actions can be done from outside government. U.S. strategic success depends on an administration’s ability to act successfully and decisively, and not on words and concepts, either inside or outside government.

This administration does face an extraordinary mix of challenges, ones it cannot easily prioritize and certainly cannot afford to simplify, spin, and ignore. These challenges include the broad need for changes in the U.S. and allied force posture and strategy in Europe and Asia. They also include dealing with a broad series of actual conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, where the United States must rely on strategic partners to an extraordinary degree.

There often are no good options, no ways to shape even the near-term outcome with a high probability of success, and no ways to eliminate uncertainty and the need to react. At the same time, this overview of U.S. challenges shows again and again that the United States has relied far too much on concepts and rhetoric and failed to develop

and implement credible strategic plans, provide the required resources, and create that kind of transparency that can win congressional and public support.

The fundamental question that arises in each case is not the need for easy and simple solutions but rather to accept the sheer complexity and uncertainty of a very different and rapidly changing world. What also arises is the need to stop confusing concepts and rhetoric with strategy, spin with transparency, and a focus on fighting sequestration with anything approaching an effective approach to the planning, programming, and budgeting necessary to create effective U.S. national security programs—both civil and military.

In every case, there is a clear need for the administration to have developed meaningful net assessments and risk assessments, tied strategy to clear plans, made the proper resources available, defined strategic partnership in tangible and credible terms, and developed credible narratives and metrics to measure effectiveness.

Moreover, the administration must do so with a sufficient level of transparency and depth to show it has strategies that are properly formed, adequately resourced, and are as effective as possible. Today, it has created a massive credibility gap, one where far too much domestic and allied distrust seems justified.

At the same time, there is an equal need for Congress to stop calling in vague terms for strategy and insist on tangible, credible legal requirements and that suitable classified and public reports be provided to justify the administration's budget requests and create some basis for bridging the partisan void.