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# Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: Is Decisive Force an Option?

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# **Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: Is Decisive Force an Option?**

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

The United States has now been continuously at war for more than a decade and a half, and still has not found a way to decisively win a conflict in a "failed state" where extremists are willing to use almost any level of force to achieve their objective. This is not a result of any failure in military capability in the sense of conventional war, but it is a critical failure to come to grips with irregular warfare, with the challenge of terrorism and religious extremism, and to link military action to the ability to create post-conflict stability.

The United States did demonstrate in 1991 that it could quickly win a conflict against a weaker conventional force in Iraq, but has struggled ever since to find ways to use decisive force against non-state actors, to deal with civil wars, and to bring deeply divided nations back to some form of stability. In the process, it has expanded from a war in Afghanistan that began in 2001 to invading Iraq in 2003, to a steadily wider a wide range of military operations in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.

The United States became involved in new military efforts to bring stability to Somalia in 2009, efforts that steadily escalated in 2016. The United States used force to help drive Qaddafi from power in Libya in 2011, and has since made episodic attempts to use force to achieve stability in Libya and to end ISIS's presence in that country.

The United States became involved a steadily escalating civil war in Syria in 2012, where U.S. efforts are now directed at ISIS in both Syria and Iraq, despite many continuing sources of tension and conflict. The United States first began active strikes against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2009, and began to support Saudi Arabia and the UAE in their intervention in a growing civil war in Yemen in 2015. At the same time, it has steadily escalated its attempts to use force to check violent Islamist extremist movements in Sub-Saharan Africa

So far, the United States has not been able to define any path toward reaching clear post-conflict objectives for any of these conflicts, much less to achieve decisive results. Its apparent victory in Afghanistan from 2001-2002 has become an enduring conflict linked closely to extremism and terrorism in Pakistan. Its near withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 has ended in supporting a major war against ISIS that involves troops in both Iraq and Syria, but where defeating ISIS as a "caliphate" does not offer any clear prospect of bringing lasting stability to either country.

The uncertain, and episodic U.S. military role in Libya, Somalia, and Yemen has scored tactical victories, but had a fleeting and secondary impact at best. Like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, all three countries have seen a growing internal crisis, levels of violence and civilian casualties, growing problems with outside interference or new extremist movements, and seem locked into an indefinite process of protracted war.

The threshold of violence, and its cost to the civilian population, has risen in every country where the United States has intervened. The cumulative impact of years of war have also created growing strain on neighboring states, and the U.S. must now increasingly cope with interventions by other outside powers. These include the Russian intervention in Syria, and growing Russian ties to Iran. They include Turkish intervention in Iraq and Syria that is focused largely on its

tensions with the Kurds. And, they include Iranian influence and its steadily expanding military role in the region—particularly in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

As of April 2017, the United States has not developed a clear strategy for bringing lasting stability to any of the countries where it is now fighting. Even when it may be able to inflict major defeats on a key opponent like ISIS, there is no guarantee that the end result will be any form of peace, or even that such a victory will significantly reduce the broader threat posed by terrorism and extremism. The United States not only seems locked into prolonged wars of attrition and locked into the support of host countries in the Middle East and South Asia that are the equivalent of failed states, but U.S. statistics on terrorism show a steady rise in the number of incidents and the number of areas where such threats exist.

The United States does face massive grand strategic challenges in achieving any form of lasting victory. It is fighting in failed states that have been destabilized and thrust into conflict by a host of factors beyond U.S. control. Failed governance, corruption, failed economic development, massive population growth and unemployment, deep internal divisions along ethnic and sectarian lines, and the rise of religious extremism in reaction to decades of failed secularism.

It also has been forced to meet new military challenges. These include the need to fight protracted low-level wars where massive numbers of civilians are constantly at risk. They include finding ways to fight that limit U.S. involvement and commitments to the limited strategic value of the objective and finding ways to enable the host country or allied non-state actors to fight most of their own battles. Most critically, they mean finding some way to help the states and movements the United States is supporting to create a favorable outcome in the form of lasting national stability or at least the absence of conflict.

From a military viewpoint, the key issue is whether the United States can credibly find a level of force—combined with broader efforts to bring stability—whose size and cost will both match the strategic value of the objective and offers a serious probability of lasting victory. In practice, the United States—and the Trump Administration—must find credible answers to three key questions the United States has so far failed to properly and honestly address in any of its current wars:

- Whether the United States can find ways to help the governments or movements in the nations where it is fighting and exercising decisive force in defeating extremist and enemy movements *and* create some form of meaningful stability and development?
- Whether the United States can find ways to defeat the overall rise of terrorism and extremism, rather than continuing to win limited pyrrhic victories against elements of given movements like Al Qaeda and ISIS?
- And, whether the United States can deal with the rising tensions caused by outside intervention by states like Russia and Turkey, the rise of the Iranian threat and influence, and help maintain the security and stability of the other states in regions where it is fighting?

Here it must be stressed that tactical victories or gains against given movements are not a lasting form of victory. Containing and limiting the scale of conflict and instability may prove to be a necessary alternative to actual victory, but winning in grand strategic terms in any of the given ongoing wars, or in any of the growing number of limited U.S. military interventions, means ending a conflict on favorable terms that bring lasting stability.

At the same time, this analysis explores three different ways the United States and the Trump Administration may be able to make more decisive use of force—several of which have already shown that they can make an important difference:

- *Use more airpower and use it more effectively.* In practical military terms, the Administration can increase the amount of combat air airpower it provides, although it must deal with the problem of civilian casualties and the increasingly unrealistic demands that have been placed on the use of airstrikes.

The U.S. combination of rapidly deployable precision strike and air combat capability—and its global intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (IS&R) assets—gives it a unique capability to aid host country forces, to compensate for their weaknesses, and to hit at the core of hostile non-state actors. The United States can only use such assets effectively, however, if it can change the belief that civilian casualties and collateral damage cannot be judged by the day, if it is working more effectively with host countries to limit such losses, and if the net result has a positive impact in both military and human terms.

- *Create effective train and assist and combat support missions.* The Administration cannot deploy major U.S. ground combat forces for domestic political reasons, as well as because of the probable reaction from various factions in each host country, problems with Iran and Russia, and the practical problems in supporting and basing U.S. forces.

The Administration can, however, make further significant increases in the scope and nature of the train and assist mission, inland-based combat support from elements like Marine artillery units and U.S. Army and Marine attack helicopter units, and the use of special force in small, elite combat units—particularly in combination with elite host country forces. It can also increase the flow of U.S. arms and various forms of service and intelligence support—always subject to political sensitivities and cost to both the United States and the host country.

- *Use conditional aid and active diplomacy to encourage host countries to make necessary reforms and move towards stability, recovery, and development.* The Trump Administration must look beyond ISIS and the threat of violent Islamist extremism, and use the full range of U.S. influence to push host countries and non-state actors towards workable political compromises, improved governance, winning popular support, and achieving economic recovery and development.

This does not mean transforming host countries and allies. It means encouraging reform on terms that suit their culture and priorities, and it means accepting the fact that slow real world progress in limited areas that host countries find acceptable will often be far more productive.

The United States should also explore the creation of international aid programs that are tied to host country performance, and to create a broad international effort to improve host country governance, speed of recovery, and move towards economic development. International stability programs under the direction of bodies like the World Bank or the United Nations offer a way of increasing aid funds, sharing the burden, and minimizing competition between outside powers—most or all of which may see a clear national interest in the stability of a given state if it is not dominated by another power.

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## **Failure in Two Past Administrations**

The U.S. track record to date has not been reassuring. Syria and Yemen have been added to Afghanistan and Iraq in what seems to be a growing list of protracted wars in "failed states" and the political upheavals since 2011 have made it clear that there is no predictable limit to the number of future cases.

Two U.S. Administrations, and the U.S. national security community, have failed to find workable solutions to all three of the problems necessary to put end to such conflicts. Instead, each war now poses a far greater challenge to the Trump Administration than either the Bush or Obama Administrations faced when they took office.

### ***Failures Under George W. Bush***

One key lesson from the George W. Bush Administration is that force size is not the issue. Massive U.S. forces did not prove to be decisive forces. The United States used a combination of largely U.S. forces and Northern Alliance forces to drive the Taliban and Al Qaeda out of Afghanistan in 2001-2002. It seemed to have won a decisive victory, and to have created what approached the state of an occupation government in an effort to unite and reshape Afghanistan's politics, government, economy and key elements of its culture.

The Bush Administration then carried out a major invasion of Iraq in 2003 using U.S. and allied military forces. It won a decisive victory against Saddam Hussein's forces. It then occupied Iraq, then attempted to transform Iraq using massive amounts of U.S. aid.

In both cases, a seemingly decisive initial victory led to a major insurgency fought largely by violent extremism movements, but driven by critical sectarian, ethnic, and tribal tensions and corrupt and incompetent host country governance. As in Vietnam, the United States and its allies won virtually every tactical clash. The United States could not, however, fully secure the countryside and key urban areas, or deny their opponents sanctuaries in Pakistan, Syria, and Iran. They also could not deal with the deep internal divisions in Afghanistan and Iraq, produce national unity, or create an approach to "win, hold, and build" that created strong popular support for the governments the United States sought to aid.

The U.S. failed to create effective host country forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq. It did train and assist local forces, but they remained weak, and played only a limited role in most of the fighting during the life of the Bush Administration. The one major success by local forces during this Bush Administration was the rise of local Sunni opposition to Al Qaeda and other insurgent movements in western Iraq, rather than the role played by the Iraqi Army. The U.S. effort to create effective Afghan forces remained limited and sharply underfunded and understaffed through the life of the Bush Administration.

In spite of exaggerated claims, the U.S. efforts to transform Afghanistan and Iraq did not create a stable structure of host country governance, sustained economic development, or political structures that could unite either country. Overambitious attempts at reform of the justice system failed, and elected strongmen proved to be power seekers and corrupt. They also failed to deal with critical sectarian, ethnic, and tribal differences and continuing low level violence.

Years of war wasted the impact of initial U.S. tactical victories, and did so at immense cost. The United States, its allies, host country forces, and host country civilians suffered serious

casualties, collateral damage, and loss of jobs, businesses, and homes. The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) reports that the United States alone suffered some 2,200 dead and 20,000 wounded in Afghanistan, and over 4,400 dead and nearly 32,000 wounded in Iraq. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) estimates the wars cost the U.S. alone some \$1.3 trillion by September 2011, and that their cost had risen to an estimated \$4.4 billion to \$6.7 billion a month by the end of President Bush's term in office.

### ***Failures Under President Barack Obama***

Inadequate levels of U.S. forces proved to be even worse. President Obama did approve a temporary surge of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2009, but then set deadlines for U.S. withdrawal by the end of 2014 that were not conditions-based, and were far too early to allow the creation of effective Afghan forces after years of limited U.S. effort and neglect during the Bush Administration.

The Obama Administration was no more able to push the Karzai government into effective reform and governance than President Bush, and could not do more to prevent Pakistan from providing sanctuary for the Taliban and other insurgents. As a result, when U.S. and allied combat forces largely withdrew from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, they left half-formed Afghan forces behind, a deeply divided and corrupt government, and an economy that relied on levels of aid and wartime spending by outside forces that dropped to critically lower levels.

President Obama did steadily slip the deadlines for withdrawing the remaining cadres of advisors, counterterrorism forces, and air units in Afghanistan until after 2014. He did not, however, provide adequate air support, provide a broad level of train and assist manpower, or provide adequate combat support on the ground.

He continued to cut the total U.S. military presence regardless of the fact that the security situation steadily deteriorated from the end 2014 to the time he left office in January 2017. He left office with a deeply divided and increasingly unpopular Afghan government, half-formed Afghan security forces with no real airpower and limited ground force capability, a growing Afghan economic crisis, steadily deteriorating Afghan internal stability, and a Pakistan that continued to provide sanctuary for the Taliban and other threat forces.

President Obama completed the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq that President Bush had begun in 2007. He did little to resist Iraqi pressure to withdraw all U.S. combat forces from Iraq by the end of 2011 in spite of warnings from some his senior military advisors that much larger cadres of U.S. forces should stay to fully develop Iraqi capabilities.

The Obama Administration did equally little to resist Prime Minister Maliki's increasingly authoritarian leadership in Iraq, and largely ignored Maliki's failure to develop more effective Iraqi security forces, and his alienation of Iraq's Sunni and Kurds—which made Iraq steadily more vulnerable to the rise of ISIS and violent extremists in Syria.

The Administration chose to sharply limit the role of the United States and U.S. forces in both Iraq and Syria from 2011 onwards, at a time when massive political upheavals led to civil war and the rise of extremism and sectarian and ethnic violence in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The United States seemed to have hoped that the "Arab Spring" in the MENA region would somehow lead to the rise stable democracies, but only made limited efforts to deal with the rise of civil conflict in Libya and Yemen, and did not intervene as the one peaceful protests in Syria became a civil war, and was not prepared to act when a spin-off of Al Qaeda called ISIS seized

much of Eastern Syria in 2013 and then invaded Western Iraq—which had become the scene of new low level violence between its Sunnis and the Central government.

The Administration did begin to redeploy U.S. combat aircraft and more train and assist forces to Iraq in 2014, and did try to train moderate rebel forces in Syria. However, the Administration used only limited and highly constrained amounts of airpower and train and assist forces in Iraq in its effort to create effective host country forces, and initially tried to avoid any direct U.S. advisor role in ground combat. It made only limited U.S. diplomatic and aid efforts to encourage host country reform and stability in Iraq—just as it did in Afghanistan.

The end result was strategy of "creeping incrementalism" in Iraq where the United States only increased its military forces in small steps as it became clear that each then current level of effort was not succeeding. In the process, it limited U.S. military action to the point where it failed to create effective host country forces and helped create a war of attrition against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, as well as an open ended civil war between the Assad regime and Arab rebels in the rest of Syria.

The lack of effective U.S. action helped lead to Iranian, Hezbollah, Russian and Turkish intervention. It also gave ISIS years in which to dig in, perfect a strategy of the used civilians as human shields, various forms of suicide attacks, and "fortress" cities and towns filled with booby traps and ambush points

The Administration proved equally indecisive in taking the lead in Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. While U.S. intervention remained much lower than in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, the United States went from intervention in one nation in 2001 to intervention in six nations by 2016—as well as more limited interventions in a number of Sub-Saharan states.

The Obama's shift to what might charitably be called "strategic minimalism" did reduce U.S. casualties and costs. The shift to Operation Freedom's Sentinel in Afghanistan after 2014—and the removal of most U.S. and allied combat troops—only resulted in 34 dead and 154 wounded between 2014 and March 22, 2017. The U.S. military effort in Iraq and Syria produced even more limited casualties between 2013 and March 2017.

No reliable cost estimates exist of the U.S. share of the fighting after 2014, but the CRS estimates the total cost of the Afghan War as \$815 billion between 2001-2014, and the cost of the Iraq War at \$686 billion, or some \$1.5 trillion. The direct immediate costs between 2005 and 2016, seem to be closer to \$126 billion. The Department of Defense also reports that and the total cost of air operations in Iraq and Syria from August 8, 2014 to January 31, 2017 was \$11.4 billion with average daily cost of \$12.7 million for 908 days of operations.

### ***The Human Cost of Protracted War and the Growing Challenge to Stability: 2001-2017***

U.S. costs, however, were only a tiny part of the growing human tragedy that occurred in each war, and that steadily increased the challenges in going from war to any form of lasting stability. The creation of major wars of attrition between 2001 and 2017 turned millions of civilians in each conflict state into refugees, internally displaced persons, and the displaced and destitute. By the time the Obama Administration left office, this included at least half the population in Syria and Yemen, and massive numbers of Afghans, of Iraqis and Libyans.

The summary statistics on the current human cost of each of the four wars are a clear warning of the price of failing to either find some form of decisive force or be able to bring any form of stability.

- *Afghanistan*: U.S. and allied withdrawal from Afghanistan led to the near collapse of much of the more modern sector of the economy that had become dependent on outside aid and wartime spending, and UN estimates of Afghan civilian casualties rose sharply once the United States announced in December 2010 that it would remove almost all of its forces by the end of 2014. There are no reliable estimates of the total humanitarian impact of the fighting but UNAMA estimates that the number of civilian killed and injured directly in combat was at least 57,000 between 2011 and 2016.

The UN estimated at the end of 2016 that 9.3 million Afghans needed humanitarian aid, that infant mortality and child medical needs had reached record levels, and that half a million Afghans had lost their homes and livelihood because of the fighting. It was clear the number needing aid was rising sharply, driven in part by Iran and Pakistan's ongoing expulsion of over one million Afghans living in these countries. The World Bank estimated that the fighting led to a steady rise in poverty after 2008, and the UN estimated that 1.6 million people were severely food insecure. Severe acute malnutrition (SAM) had breached emergency thresholds in 20 of 34 provinces, and 1.8 million people required treatment for acute malnutrition, of which 1.3 million were children under five.

- *Iraq*: There are no reliable estimates of the number of civilian casualties in the Iraq war between 2003 and 2016. Estimates between 2003 and 2006/2007 range from 151,000 to over 1,000,000. One of the most credible estimates—by Iraq Body Count—puts documented civilian deaths from violence at 172,663 – 192,730, as of February 2017, but some sources feel the indirect deaths from the fighting could make the total two to three times higher. No counts of injured, those affected by disease, and total displaced/refugees during 2003-2016 seem credible, but the UN's *Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* (OCHA) put the number of Iraqis that then needed humanitarian aid at 11 million towards the end of 2016, and that there were 3.0 million Iraqis displaced and 6.2 million were receiving humanitarian assistance.
- *Syria*: The Syrian crisis and war may have begun relatively recently, but the UN OCHA estimated at the end of 2016 that "civilians continue to bear the brunt of a conflict marked by unparalleled suffering, destruction and disregard for human life. 13.5 million people require humanitarian assistance, including 4.6 million people in need trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, where they are exposed to grave protection threats.

Over half of the population has been forced from their homes, and many people have been displaced multiple times. Children and youth comprise more than half of the displaced, as well as half of those in need of humanitarian assistance. Parties to the conflict act with impunity, committing violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. The UN had ceased to estimate civilian casualties in early 2016 because of the inability to produce reliable estimates, but the number almost certainly exceeded 400,000 then and probably was close to, or higher than 500,000 by the end of 2016.

- *Yemen*: The war in Yemen is the most recent major conflict where the U.S. has intervened, but has had the least U.S. intervention. However—like Libya—it is also a

warning that the results of regional conflicts can be devastating even if the United States takes little or no action. The UN OHCA estimated in early 2017 that,

"Yemen was already the poorest country in the Middle East when the crisis escalated. Men, women, and children were already facing a humanitarian crisis, stemmed from years of poverty, poor governance, and instability, including widespread violations of human rights. The situation has only worsened in the past year and the speed and scale of the deterioration is alarming. The economy is near collapse, public and private services have all but disappeared, and Yemenis have lost most of their livelihoods and have depleted most of their saving. Yemen has turned into a protection crisis where the average citizen is facing tremendous hardships and the most vulnerable populations are struggling simply to survive.

"More than 19 months since conflict escalated have left an estimated 18.8 million people in need some kind of assistance or protection in order to meet their basic needs, including 10.3 million who are in acute need. This represents an increase of almost 20 per cent since late 2014 and is driven by increases across key sectors. The 18.8 million people in need estimation is lower than the 21.2 million cited for 2016. These changes do not reflect an improvement in the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Yemen, but rather a further tightening around priorities based on a rigorous analysis of evidence.

"...An estimated 14 million people are currently food insecure, including 7 million people who do not know where their next meal will come from. This represents a 33 per cent increase since late 2014. An estimated 14.4 million people require assistance to ensure access to safe drinking water and sanitation, including 8.2 million who are in acute need. ...An estimated 14.8 million people lack access to basic healthcare, including 8.8 million living in severely under-served areas. Medical materials are in chronically short supply, and only 45 per cent of health facilities are functioning.

"...About 3.3 million children and pregnant or lactating women are acutely malnourished, including 462,000 children under 5 suffering from severe acute malnutrition. This represents a 63 per cent increase since late 2015 and threatens the lives and life-long prospects of those affected. An estimated 4.5 million people need emergency shelter or essential household items, including IDPs, host communities and initial returnees. Ongoing conflict-related displacements, as well as initial returns to some areas, are driving these needs...About 2 million school-age children are out of school and need support to fulfil their right to education. More than 1,600 schools are currently unfit for use due to conflict-related damage, hosting of IDPs, or occupation by armed groups."

These, however, are only the *current* human costs of war. Each war has had a massive future impact on Afghan, Iraqi, Libyan, and Yemeni ability to recover and develop. They have created challenges to any future government of all four states that will now continue for at least a decade or more once—and if—the fighting ends in some form of stability and even if the new governments involved make a concerted and continuing effort to bring reform and development.

War has also compounded deep problems that existed long before political upheavals and war. Each country had critical problems before the current conflicts began. In all four cases, studies by the UN Arab Human Development Reports, IMF, and World Bank showed each nation had extraordinarily low quality of governance and major economic development problems even before the wars started, and it was clear that each state had deep sectarian, ethnic, regional, and tribal tensions.

It is impossible to estimate how much each war will add to the cost of moving towards stable and sustainable governance, development, and security in any of the countries where the United States is now using force—if only because there is no way to determine if, when, and how each war will end. However, working estimates by the IMF and World Bank indicate they working require run into hundreds of billions of dollars per country to recover and move towards rapid development if a given it war ended in the current year. These are by necessity "guesstimates."

If one only looks at the case of Syria, a World Bank study of Syria noted in late 2016 that, "the destruction of physical infrastructure amounted to US\$75 billion and the UN estimated that investments of US\$150-200 billion will be needed to bring Syrian GDP back to pre-conflict levels." Estimates of these costs by World Vision and Frontier Economics have risen to over \$275 billion today, and indicate that the total could be over \$1 trillion if the civil wars drag on to 2020.

To put these figures in additional perspective, the CIA estimates that Syria's GDP dropped by 70% between 2010 and 2016, was only \$24.6 billion in 2014 at the official exchange rate, and was only \$55.8 billion in 2015 even in purchasing power parity terms. And, no one can begin to estimate what it will take to deal with what may well be a deeply divided country, to reduce corruption and misgovernment to workable levels, and to establish any stable pattern of income distribution and reconstruction efforts.

Real world recovery and development in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Syria will have to deal with political realities and post conflict tensions—not macroeconomic hopes. What does seem likely, however, is that simply reaching pre-war levels of development and per capita income and services will involve recovery times of five to ten years—and lag in recovery alone will increase the political problems in moving towards stability.

In every case to date, the fighting has also tended to increase the level of violent extremism over time, has created new centers of Islamist extremist activity, new violent movements and splinter groups, and has spread terrorism and insurgent activity into new areas. It is clear from a wide range of reporting that war has increased ethnic tensions like those between Arab and Kurd, sectarian tensions like those between Sunni and Shi'ite, as well as tribal and regional tensions.

This has increased prospects for future civil conflicts. Moreover, the wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have increased the tensions and competition for influence between Iran and its Arab neighbors, and led to outside intervention by powers like Russia, Iran, and Turkey as well as by non-state actors like the Hezbollah.

## **The Challenge to the Trump Administration**

If the Trump Administration is to achieve any kind of lasting victories under these conditions, it must look well beyond its current emphasis on ISIS and today's violent Islamist extremist movements. Defeating the ISIS "Caliphate" in Syria and Iraq is important, but it is only one step in bringing some form of lasting stability in Syria and Iraq, and is largely irrelevant to U.S. success in Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and the other conflicts where the U.S. is now intervening.

The Administration must consider the fact that the United States must address the far broader challenge of finding some way to win or end each conflict while preventing the spread of similar wars to other friendly and largely Muslim states. It must also prepare to deal with the fact that America's present wars involve types of conflicts that are likely to emerge in similar form for several decades to come.

The United States will still deal with the risk of major nuclear and conventional conflicts, and the emergence of a more multipolar world, but many future wars are likely to be irregular or asymmetric wars where the key strategic goal will be to bring stability to divided states and combat efforts by hostile powers to compel the United States to fight and lose equally asymmetric and irregular conflicts.

There are no certain paths to victory either in terms of the fighting or the critical challenge of ending such conflicts in ways that bring lasting national stability. America's past record of failure, however, makes it all too clear that the U.S. must change some key aspects of the way it uses force, find more effective ways to create effective forces in given host countries and strategic partners, and focus firmly and consistently on moving host countries towards a credible form of power conflict.

***Strategic Triage: Establishing the Right Level of Force in Limited Wars  
of Limited Strategic Interest***

One key change is to focus on the strategic impact of using force, rather than simply react to given threats or the possibility of winning some form of tactical victories. The U.S. needs to carefully assess the risks in continuing to use force, and initiate it in the future, in ways that involve a far more careful level of *strategic triage* in deciding which of today's and future conflicts it can credibly "win."

Strategic triage means finding levels of force that can credibly win some form of meaningful victory at a cost and level of engagement that match the strategic importance of the state(s) and objective involved to the United States. There simply are too many crises and conflicts in the world for the U.S. to intervene in every case that poses a potential or limited threat, and the combined cost and duration of U.S. armed and civil intervention must be tailored to the relative importance and strategic value of the objective.

Equally, when the United States must make hard choices, meaningful strategic triage may mean focusing U.S. resources on the countries that have the most importance in terms of U.S. strategic interests. This was a key aspect of the practical application of the Marshall Plan, and—as Hans Morgenthau warned in the late 1940s—moral and ethical efforts cannot be separate from the realities and limits of power. In practice, Iraq as a major oil exporter and critical potential balance to Iran is far more important to U.S. interests than Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Somalia. The capability of the host country, the ability or inability of other states to play a role, the level of hostility from neighboring and other outside states, and the probability of success are similar considerations.

Using too much of the wrong kind of force has already proved incredibly costly and has still failed to produce a lasting favorable result. At the same time, using too little force has proved no better. As noted earlier, both have helped to create long wars of attrition that have become humanitarian disasters that promise uncertain tactical results and have created sharply worsened post-conflict stability problems that may take a decade or more to solve.

Continuing to use force when it is not clear that the U.S. can win—and/or when the strategic value of engaging in the conflict does not equal the cost or risk of engagement—is quite another. This is particularly true when for the United States when engagement steadily raises the human cost to the civilians that are directly involved.

The failures of the last two Administrations also warn that host countries and partners need to fully understand that U.S. assistance is not a way of compensating them for being failed states and or coping with failed governance. Helping a nation build is one thing, but trying to build a nation from the outside is quite another. U.S. support must be conditional on a host country developing effective security forces and carrying out effective civil reform. Neither the United States nor the world owe the governments of failed states support and continued existence, and

the lessons of recent wars make it all too clear that the United States cannot help a nation that cannot (or will not) help itself.

There is no point in committing U.S. forces and resources to limited wars when doing so ties to the United States to open ended conflicts or probable defeat. Under these conditions, the U.S. must become more willing to seek other options. The U.S. can seek to help neighboring states contain the threat to a given country. It can accept the risk of relying on a conflict to eventually burn out in acceptable ways. And, the U.S. it can deliberately leave the resolution of crises and wars to other states, effectively forcing them to take up the burden and responsibility.

### ***But, Give First Priority to Maintaining Stability in Strategic Partners***

It is also critical that the U.S. conduct strategic triage on a broad basis in ways which reflect its overall strategic interests. Preserving the security and stability of patterns that are not at war involves far less risk, and is far cheaper, than letting the situation deteriorate in to serious instability or internal conflict. In the case of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, for example, the U.S. already has strategic partnerships with still stable and secure states like Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Each of these states faces many of the challenges that led to instability and warfare in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and two states—Egypt and Tunisia—have already suffered major political upheavals and face a serious economic crisis.

None of these states, however, approach the “failed state” status of the MENA countries where the U.S. is now fighting. Several play a critical role in working with the U.S. to limit the spread of violent extremism, cooperate in counterterrorism, deal with the threat posed by Iran, counter hostile outside influence and intervention, and play an important role in helping maintain some degree of regional stability. The previous analysis of the human, political, economic and security impacts of war on Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Syria warns just how dangerous even limited periods of civil war and outside intervention can be and how rapidly solvable problems can escalate to becoming critical ones.

Strategic triage does not just apply to conflict states. It applies to ensuring that the U.S. maintaining and strengthen its strategic partnerships with more stable partners, provides aid and arms where necessary, and focuses on its broader strategic interest and not simply narrow areas like burden sharing. It also means accepting the reality that partners will often evolve in their own ways, that they cannot be compelled to transform, but can be influenced to evolve.

From a practical viewpoint, it also means remembering that the first priority in achieving both lasting stability *and the human rights of the vast majority of citizens* is often jobs, economic reform, reaching working relations between hostile factions, limiting corruption, and improving the living conditions of the general population. Moreover, working slowly and over time to deal with issues like democracy, improvements in the rule of law, and the more advance aspects of human rights—and using U.S. influence carefully and persistently over time—are likely to work far better than efforts in the form of direct pressure and compulsion.

## **Using the Tools at Hand**

At the same time, the U.S. cannot easily walk away from today's wars—or avoid future commitments—without having done its best to learn from its past mistakes, and doing a better job of exploiting the tools it does have at hand. The challenge will also endure long beyond its current wars. It is far from clear that the U.S. will face easier or "better" wars in the future, the

war in Iraq almost certainly does involve vital U.S. national interests in terms of the security of world energy flows and containing Iran, and its other three wars now raise key issues about the credibility of other U.S. strategic partnerships and U.S. ability to use its influence and military forces effectively.

There are sharp limits to the real world options open to the Trump Administration after a decade and half of U.S. mistakes and ongoing conflict. The internal divisions in each country where the U.S. is fighting, and the lack of an effective and unified host country government, present massive challenges. So do problems with Pakistan, the spread of other violent extremist movements, and outside intervention by states like Iran, Russia, and Turkey and non-state actors like the Hezbollah.

It is far from clear that the U.S. can now exercise decisive force in any of its wars in the sense of creating lasting stability versus limiting and containing the problems caused by the instability of a given conflict state. There are sharp political limits to the resources the U.S. can use, the destructive legacies of years of war are a fact of life, and the cause of instability in each state run deep and go far beyond today's extremist movements.

At the same time, the Bush and Obama Administrations have left a legacy where the U.S. military have far more capable U.S. counterinsurgency capabilities, and—for all its problems—the creeping escalation of the Obama Administration showed that the U.S. does have military tools it can still use in each conflict to achieve more decisive results.

Three of these tools are particularly critical:

- *Use more airpower and use it more effectively.* In practical military terms, the Administration can increase the amount of combat air airpower it provides, although it must deal with the problem of civilian casualties and the increasingly unrealistic demands that have been placed on the use of airstrikes.

The U.S. combination of rapidly deployable precision strike and air combat capability --and its global intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (IS&R) assets -- gives it a unique capability to aid host country forces, compensate for their weaknesses, and hit at the core of hostile non-state actors. The U.S. can only use such assets effectively, however, if it can change the belief that civilian casualties and collateral damage cannot be judged by the day, it is working more effectively with host countries to limit such losses, and the net result has a positive impact in both military and human terms.

- *Create effective train and assist and combat support missions.* The Administration cannot deploy major U.S. ground combat forces for domestic political reasons, as well as because of the probable reaction from various factions in each host country, problems with Iran and Russia, and the practical problems in supporting and basing U.S. forces.

The Trump Administration can, however, make further significant increases in the scope and nature of the train and assist mission, inland-based combat support from elements like Marine artillery units and U.S. Army and Marine attack helicopter units, and the use of special force in small, elite combat units -- particularly in combination with elite host country forces. It can also increase the flow of U.S. arms and various forms of service and intelligence support -- always subject to political sensitivities and cost to both the U.S. and Host country.

- *Use conditional aid and active diplomacy to encourage host countries to make necessary reforms and move towards stability, recovery, and development.* The Trump Administration must look beyond ISIS and the threat of violent Islamist extremism and use the full range of U.S. influence to push host countries and non-state actors towards workable political compromises, improved governance, winning popular support, and achieving economic recovery and development.

This does not mean transforming host countries and allies. It means encouraging reform on terms that suit their culture and priorities, and it means accepting the fact slow real world progress in limited areas that they find acceptable will often be far more productive.

The U.S. should also explore the creation of international aid programs that are tied to host country performance, and create a broad international effort to improve host country governance, speed recovery, and move towards economic development. International stability programs under the direction of bodies like the World Bank or UN offer a way of increasing aid funds, sharing the burden, and minimizing competition between outside powers -- most or all of which may see a clear national interest in the stability of a given state if it is not dominated by another power.

## **Use More Airpower and Use It More Effectively: Meeting the Challenge Posed by Enemies that Use Civilians as Weapons of War**

On the one hand, the rising use of U.S. precision air strikes—either by manned aircraft or UCAVs—offer the quickest way to use U.S. military power to reinforce host country forces, help them advance against dug-in insurgent forces, save them from tactical defeat, and give them—and their governments time—to reform and improve.

At the same time, the U.S. needs to be far more honest about the real-world cost of using decisive amounts of air power in terms of civilian casualties and collateral damage, and meet the challenge its opponents pose in using civilians—and real and exaggerated claims about civilian casualties—as de facto weapons of war.

The U.S. military needs to come fully to grips with the fact it faces a major challenge in strategic communications, military operations, and working with host countries in using force in wars where the opponent deliberately uses civilians as shields, attacks civilians as a means of achieving victory, and uses terrorism and asymmetric warfare against civilians both inside theater of conflict and outside it to achieve tactical and strategic results.

Using civilians and civilian casualties—often targeted by sect, ethnic group, or tribes—but sometimes simply for the purposes of broad efforts at terrorism, intimidation, and alienating outside states against a given region or faith—have become a key weapon of war. They not only are used as shields, but for fundraising, human trafficking, to produce independently displaced persons, and to produce massive numbers of refugees as well as part of an effort to force religious conversions and selectively kill or "cleanse" given areas or even countries.

Over the last decade and half, the United States has steadily tried to use technology and new results of engagement to strike combatants without injuring civilians or producing collateral damage. The net result, however, has so far been to sharply raise the cost of military operations and limit their effectiveness. Non-state actors—who face no such limits on their use of civilians—have so far achieved a major advantage, and one that has greatly extended the length of conflicts and the next cost of the fighting in terms of dead, injured, refugees and IDPs, and collateral damage.

If the U.S. is to use airpower effectively it must both do everything practical to protect civilians, and change perceptions of the impact of airpower to focus on the net cumulative impact it has on civilian casualties and life—rather than remain trapped into a focus on daily casualties and collateral damage where the enemy can largely control the narrative in terms of real and exaggerated casualties and avoid having to take responsibility for both its own cumulative casualties and damage to civilian life.

### ***The Inherent Contradiction Between Warfighting and Restraint***

The U.S. cannot fight in ways that ignore the ethical and moral consequences of its actions. At the same time, any discussion of the use of force that involves risk to civilians must consider the inherent contradiction between the nature of war and the effort to establish laws of war that limit that nature. These contradictions are illustrated all too clearly by the contradictions between Clausewitz's writing on the nature of war, and the changes to the laws of war after World War II that placed limits on the use of force in ways that can produce civilian casualties. Consider the

inherent contradictions between a key quote from Clausewitz and a key portion of the text of the laws of war:

### *Clausewitz*

Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst. The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect.

If one side uses force without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other side refrains, the first will gain the upper hand. That side will force the other to follow suit; each will drive its opponent toward extremes, and the only limiting factors are the counterpoises inherent in war. This is how the matter must be seen. It would be futile -- even wrong -- to try and shut one's eyes to what war really is from sheer stress at its brutality.

Clausewitz, "What is War," Chapter One, *On War*, p. 1

### *Laws of War*

#### *Article 51 — Protection of the civilian population*

1. The civilian population and individual civilians shall enjoy general protection against dangers arising from military operations. To give effect to this protection, the following rules, which are additional to other applicable rules of international law, shall be observed in all circumstances.
2. The civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the object of attack. Acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population are prohibited.
3. Civilians shall enjoy the protection afforded by this Section, unless and for such time as they take a direct part in hostilities.
4. Indiscriminate attacks are prohibited. Indiscriminate attacks are:
  - a) those which are not directed at a specific military objective;
  - b) those which employ a method or means of combat which cannot be directed at a specific military objective; or
  - c) those which employ a method or means of combat the effects of which cannot be limited as required by this Protocol; and consequently, in each such case, are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction.
5. Among others, the following types of attacks are to be considered as indiscriminate:
  - a) an attack by bombardment by any methods or means which treats as a single military objective a number of clearly separated and distinct military objectives located in a city, town, village or other area containing a similar concentration of civilians or civilian objects; and
  - b) an attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.
6. Attacks against the civilian population or civilians by way of reprisals are prohibited.
7. The presence or movements of the civilian population or individual civilians shall not be used to render certain points or areas immune from military operations, in particular in attempts to shield military objectives from attacks or to shield, favor or impede military operations. The Parties to the conflict shall not direct the movement of the civilian population or individual civilians in order to attempt to shield military objectives from attacks or to shield military operations.

8. Any violation of these prohibitions shall not release the Parties to the conflict from their legal obligations with respect to the civilian population and civilians, including the obligation to take the precautionary measures provided for in Article 57.

Article 51, Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977.

There contradictions are not as sharp as they may initially appear. It is important to note that Clausewitz is talking about a worst case form of war between states in which at least one side not only sees no limits to the use of forces, but can achieve decisive advantages over an opponent by not placing limits on the use of force. Chapter Six and Chapter Eight of *On War* make this all too clear, along with the real world need to try to place limits on the scope of the fighting.

It is equally important to note that Article 51, and the other laws of war, do not forbid attacks that kill civilians that achieve clear military objectives, and are sufficiently vague so that a given power could interpret them to permit strategic bombing if a given side decides this is a military necessity (and can then avoid the political consequences).

From a humanitarian viewpoint, it is equally important to point out that legal experts do not limit the impact of the use of force to the immediate consequences of military action. It also includes the impact of the use of force on creating disease, IDPs, refugees, and other longer term consequences. It potentially includes the longer term impact on infrastructure and services and development. And, it necessarily includes the net impact of the fighting over time, rather than simply restraint in any given case.

The key metrics are the cumulative effects over time. Put bluntly, the total "butcher's bill" for a conflict. Using too little force in ways that produce massive cumulative damage to civilians is neither humanitarian in impact nor meaningful compliance with the laws of war—although the ability to predict the cumulative impact of using force overtime is necessarily filled with uncertainty and risk.

### ***Breaking Airpower Out of the Emphasis on Current Casualties***

The previous summaries of the human cost of each war where the U.S. is now fighting show just how high the cumulative cost of protracted war can be, particularly wars where a given side or sides punt religion, ideology, hatred, and revenge above all practical humanitarian considerations. If there is any lesson of the Afghan, Iraqi, Somali, Syrian, Yemeni and similar conflicts, it is that letting wars of attrition drag on, and letting forces that do not care about humanitarian considerations dig-in and manipulate civilian populations, produce both devastating strategic and humanitarian results. The corollary is that the same is true of indecisive action by the United States, and tactical and even strategic victories that do not produce some form of lasting post-conflict stability.

The U.S. has already begun to react to this reality—evidently because of changes to the definition of urgent combat zones under Secretary Mattis and President Trump. It has not changed its basic rules of engagement, and its goals in limiting civilian casualties and collateral damage. It has, however, recognized that the use of airpower must take the tactical situation into consideration, that it is critical to provide immediate air support to what are still developing host country forces, and that tolerating the enemy's use of human shields and the manipulation of the civilian population effectively increases both the length of war and its cumulative human cost.

It is all too clear from airstrikes in Mosul and Afghanistan that such changes can lead to mistakes and civilian casualties. It is clear that practical warfighting considerations like maintaining popular support make keeping such casualties to a minimum as critical as humanitarian and legal concerns. Finding better intelligence and targeting methods, related technologies, and ways to improve forward air controllers and the review of targeting request in near real time are critical priorities. So are making honest and transparent assessments of both immediate casualties and collateral damage and their cumulative impact.

The United States must not only fight in ways that limit these cumulative impacts as much as possible, it must be seen to do so, and to give limiting civilian losses a clear and constant operational and strategic priority. It must give this aspect of strategic communications critical priority and it must work with both host country militaries and officials to ensure they understand and accept the way in which the U.S. is using airpower. The USAF, in particular, needs to stop trying to communicate the image of nearly perfect war, and focus on explaining the necessity of real world military action.

More broadly, the U.S. needs to provide the same levels of air support to Afghan forces as it is using in Iraq, and it needs to carefully consider the need to prevent population centers in any conflict from being overrun by forces like those of ISIS that will use any such center to use civilians as weapons. It is far better to protect populations than try to "liberate" them, and it is equally important to help host country forces liberate them as quickly as possible.

## **Create Effective Train and Assist and Combat Support Missions: Focusing on Forward Efforts**

One of the few consistent lessons in building up host country forces since the time of the Korean War is that training in the rear, while essential, has limited value in creating combat effective new units, and that simply providing formal training is not substitute for forward support in the field. Another key lesson in the case failed states—particularly ones with high levels of corruption among civilians and military—is that creating effective forces takes time and requires help at every level of command—including planning, deployment, procurement, resupply and reinforcement.

One of the critical failures in the efforts of the Obama Administration—and to some extent on the part of the Bush Administration as well—was to assume that force generation could be accomplished largely through training in the rear and far more quickly than was really possible. Equally important, the political desire to be able to claim that the U.S. combat presence had ended in 2014, and to minimize any "boots of the ground" and risk of casualties, led to the creation of a fundamentally inadequate approach to the train and assist mission.

Even if all the personnel the United States and its allies had pledged to provide in a case like Afghanistan had been actually present and properly qualified from 2011-2014, the total authorized allied and U.S. forces were then cut back to the point where they could not provide personnel to assist at the Afghan Kandak level, for all Afghan corps, and aid in the critical chains of command and operations that allocate, supply, and reinforce Afghan combat operations.

In the case of Iraq and Syria, the United States halted most train and assist activity after 2011 and then tried to rely on training and the rebuilding of forces in rear. It did not send sufficient train and assist personnel forward of place them near critical links in the Iraqi chain of command than could warn of failed officers and leadership, problems with corruption, and failures to resupply

and reinforce. It took until late 2016 for the step-by-step process of creeping incrementalism to deploy the level of personnel forward to provide effective support in the field, which sometimes meant reaching down to the forward battalion level.

In both cases, the overall weaknesses of the entire force meant that there was a tendency to overstress or burn out the more effective units. It also meant that the better units were often flanked by weak units whose capabilities were known all too well to threat forces, and were not properly supported by higher levels of command. Coupled to a lack of effective close air support, artillery, and use of heavy weapons—which forward U.S. train and assist personnel later helped provide—put most Afghan forces on the defensive and greatly limited the capability of Iraqi forces to advance. Overreliance on rear area training and sharp limits on the role of Special Forces also affected the impact of U.S. efforts in Syria.

The U.S. should have learned the hard way in Vietnam that this kind of limited train and assist mission would be a recipe for failure. Its experience in fighting ISIS is Iraq forces it to reinforce the forward assist mission step by step over more than a year in spite of the fact the White House had ignored military advice to the contrary. In fact, it only fully committed U.S. military position to full forward support of Iraq forces after the battle for Mosul slowed down in December 2016.

Once again, this aspect of U.S. military efforts already seems to be changing under Secretary Mattis and President Trump. Effective train and assist efforts must take place at the forward and major combat unit levels where assist personnel are most critical in developing effective combat capability and leadership, and in vetting combat performance. These are the levels where advisors can provide feedback as to the adequacy of unit manning and resources, as well as monitor how well combat units receive supplies and reinforcements. They are also the levels where reporting on corruption, incompetence, and "ghost soldiers" is most important.

Even small numbers of expert forward advisors can make a difference, particularly if they can draw upon U.S. air strikes, combat helicopters, and artillery support. Skill is needed more than train and assist numbers, and so is a basic shift from a constant effort to limit or draw down train and assist efforts and to avoid exposing Americans to the risks of combat to providing train and assist forces that are tailored to actual need and conditions on the ground. The key is to shift away from rigid deadlines, and politically driven caps and restraints ending up with a train and assist effort too hollow to work. If the U.S. is to take on such missions at all, it must create a train and assist mission designed to win.

The U.S. however, must also accepting the fact that "train and assist" may mean keeping U.S. elements where they can stay long enough to help host country force transition to fully combat effectiveness, which can mean such forward deployments over period of several years. It means understanding that they may need to include small specialized combat elements and counterterrorism forces and that small numbers of "boots on the ground" can be vital. At the same time, the higher levels of the train and assist mission must deal quietly but effectively with host country corruption, power brokers, and incompetence. Ignoring the real world character of host country forces and not making aid conditional is as much a recipe for failure as trying to train and lead from the rear.

## **Use Conditional Aid and Active Diplomacy to Encourage Host Countries to Make Necessary Reforms and Move Towards Stability, Recovery, and Development**

One area where the policies of the Trump Administration have so far proved to be far less certain is recognizing that defeating any given extremist threat will not lead to broad success or stability. Successful attacks on any given of ISIS, Al Qaeda, or other extremist activity will not put an end to the broad range of forces that have make a small minority of Islamist extremists a serious threat. Defeating extremists will not develop national unity, effective governance, economic recovery and progress, and ethnic, sectarian, and tribal tensions. In fact, it may simply end in shaping new conflicts on ethnic, sectarian, and new levels, and lead to new forms of destabilizing outside interference. In every practical sense, "hard power" does not consist simply of military and internal security. It consists of the ability to create and maintain national stability.

The sheer scale of the immediate human challenge in creating national stability has already been described. The longer term and even more serious challenge of moving back towards development has been touched upon, but planning and analysis need to have a much higher priority to develop a proper understanding of the problem—much less the solution.

This means there is no place in U.S. combat zones and the many troubled states in the regions around them for "normal embassies" and "normal" diplomats. The Trump Administration must push both its civilian and military country teams to use the full range of U.S. influence to push host countries and non-state actors towards workable political compromises, improved governance, winning popular support, and achieving economic recovery and development.

Here a much abused quote from Lawrence needs to be modified and acted upon, rather than simply quoted in ways that echo its patronizing original character. "Letting them do it their way" is not enough, but no nation can be developed from the outside in ways its leaders and people reject, and no nation wants to be transformed in another nation's image. The goal should be to press the reforms and advances towards progress that many in a given nation's elite have already decided should take place.

A key lesson from both the Bush and Obama Administrations is that the road to stability—when it is possible at all—does not mean transforming host countries and allies. It means actively seeking to reconcile given factions, bridge over sectarian and ethnic differences, and encourage reform on terms that suit that nation's culture and priorities.

Above all, stability aid is not development aid in the classic sense. Focusing on stability means focusing on the fact that a nation is at war driven by serious civil tensions and conflict. Diplomacy and aid should be part of an integrated civil and military campaign plan and one that recognizes that aid and development cannot be separated from the realities of war. The civil and economic aid efforts must help deal with the critical tensions and problems that divided a nation and its people in the first place. They must concentrate on meeting their highest priority needs of a divided people, and seek to move towards recovery in ways that suit their values and priorities—rather than ways that mirror image American and Western values and methods.

Time and patience will be equally critical. Success means accepting what will often be slow real world progress in areas where key factions must reconcile or compromise to end the fighting, and generally that meet urgent popular needs. Success means understanding that it may be years

before most conflict countries can do more than concentrate on giving their peoples adequate food, shelter, jobs, education, health care and critical services. Democracy, the finer points of human rights, and the more advanced forms of the rule of law cannot normally be critical wartime priorities.

These are also areas where the Trump and future U.S. Administrations should consider promoting a multi-national approach—what some have suggested should be an updated and international form of a “Marshall Plan.” Not every country can send effective military forces. Many countries can make a contribution to aid, and will have the internal political support to do so, particularly if their peoples see that this helps bring real-world progress towards stability, actually meets popular needs, and moves a country towards peace.

At the same time, the U.S. should learn from its own, UN, and allied failures in past wartime aid to Afghanistan and Iraq. Badly planned and coordinated efforts do not succeed. This is particularly true when such efforts focus on broad national development in ways that largely ignore the realities of ongoing wars and their causes. Similarly, UN, IMF, and World Bank efforts will fail when they focus on development in nation-wide macroeconomic terms and best case estimates of the impact of economic reform in a nation at peace.

As noted earlier, international stability efforts cannot succeed when they focus on development rather than the civil causes of conflict and urgent human needs. They cannot succeed when they put badly controlled funds into the hand of corrupt and incapable governments, and do not tightly control the allocation of funds and tie the flow of money to proven metrics of performance and effectiveness. The flow of aid needs to be clearly tied to host country performance.

## **A Cautionary Statement: Leaving Can Still Be the Closest Thing to Victory**

No mix of these three options can offer a guarantee of success in any given current war. The U.S. must define limited wars as ones that it can afford to lose, and that the United States can afford to walk away from. The ability of any given "failed state" to move towards stability—in the face of all the problems that made it a failed state in the first place—has already proved to be all too uncertain.

As the United States learned from the collapse of South Vietnam, there are practical limits to what the U.S. can credibly do at a credible cumulative cost. Options like containment, or leaving in ways that force other states to deal with the burden, may sometimes have to be the answer. In fact, leaving a host country with a government that failed to do its share of the job may actually help the U.S. deal with other "failed states" wars.

As the U.S. reshapes its security and stability efforts, it also needs to make a major shift in its political and diplomatic rhetoric. No limited war should ever be described as a vital national interest or crusade. The U.S. needs to stop making public statements that are the equivalent of broad open ended commitments. The United States should always make it clear to the host country and its people that U.S. security and stability depend on their performance, and that there are many nations in the world that both need U.S. help and that they must use it effectively. The U.S. not only has no practical reason to continue to try to help a nation that cannot or will not help itself, and it must act on the principle that if such cases persist, it will actually leave.