

Obama, Trump and the Wars of Credibility

by George Friedman - October 29, 2019

The United States is in the process of shifting a core dimension of its strategic doctrine. In the past, the U.S. resorted to the use of force to address international threats. Barack Obama was the first president to argue that the use of force, particularly in the Middle East, was costly and ineffectual and that other means had to be used to exercise foreign policy. He ran his first campaign for president on this basis. He was only partially able to shift the direction of U.S. strategy. Donald Trump has extended Obama's policy and applied it more consistently by refusing to strike at Iran over the Persian Gulf crisis and [the Saudi oil facilities attack](#) and, most recently, [withdrawing from the Syria-Turkey border](#).

The shift in strategy was something I predicted in [my 2011 book, "The Next Decade."](#) The basic argument was that the United States is now a global power with no global challenger, only regional ones of various sizes. Having a strategic doctrine of responding to challenges with military force would leave the decision on when to go to war up to the adversary. John F. Kennedy once said, "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty." This doctrine made sense in dealing with the Soviet Union, but in a less orderly world, it reads like a blank check on U.S. military power and an invitation to other nations to draw the U.S. into combat at their will. I reasoned that a more nuanced foreign policy would emerge in the 2010s, one that would compel the U.S. to become more disciplined and selective in committing U.S. forces to combat.

In the 74 years since World War II ended, the U.S. has spent about 28 years, roughly 38 percent of the time, engaged in large-scale, division-level combat, leaving over 90,000 U.S. military personnel dead. This includes the Korean War, the Vietnam War, [the Afghan War](#) and the War in Iraq, and there have been other deployments in smaller conflicts. Nearly three decades over a 74-year period is a staggering amount of time for any nation to be at war, particularly the leading global power.

With the exception of Operation Desert Storm, the United States has not won any of these wars. Korea ended in an armistice, with both sides at roughly the same point as when they began. Vietnam ended with the enemy flag flying over Saigon. Afghanistan, Iraq and related wars did not end in outright defeat, but they have not ended in victory. Given that the United States crushed both

Japan and, with the help of the Allies, Germany in World War II and emerged with overwhelming military power, the increased tempo of U.S. military operations since 1945, combined with consistently unsatisfactory outcomes, must be analyzed to understand the emergence of the Obama-Trump doctrine.

One explanation that must be dispensed with is that the American public does not have the patience to allow a war to be fought to a satisfactory conclusion. There was no anti-war movement of any significance during Korea. There was an anti-war movement over Vietnam, but the conflict continued for seven years, and the public voted overwhelmingly for pro-war Richard Nixon and against anti-war George McGovern in 1972. There has been opposition to the Iraq War, but it was only a peripheral reason for the U.S. drawdown there, after nine years of war.

World War II was fought on a different scale. It was a total war, one that could not be lost. Defeat would have posed fundamental dangers to the United States, so all necessary resources were devoted to the war effort. It was the central focus of society as a whole. Bringing massive resources to bear, including atomic bombs at its conclusion, the United States emerged from the war victorious.

None of the other conflicts were total wars that involved existential threats to the United States. During the Cold War, the interventions in Korea and Vietnam were the result of indirect U.S. interests. From the Truman administration's perspective, Korea was outside core U.S. interests. The U.S. had no treaty with or strategic interest in South Vietnam. In both cases, the benefits of engaging in conflict were indirect.

The U.S. strategy in the Cold War was containment. The U.S. did not intend to invade the Soviet Union, or later China, but it opposed its expansion. The U.S. got involved in both Korea and Vietnam to defend the credibility of the doctrine of containment, fearing that a lack of U.S. engagement in these conflicts would be interpreted by the Soviets and Chinese as a lack of commitment to the doctrine. Even more important, the U.S. was afraid that staying out of these wars would lead its allies to draw the conclusion that American guarantees were hollow and that the alliance structure needed for the containment strategy would collapse.

The U.S. engaged in the two wars, therefore, not out of strategic necessity but to demonstrate American reliability. They therefore could not be fought as total wars. The amount of effort required to show a willingness to engage was much less than the amount of effort needed to decisively crush enemy forces. It was necessary to demonstrate U.S. will for global reasons, but imprudent to devote the force needed to win the war. It was also impossible to withdraw from the war, as abandoning a conflict would be the same as refusing to engage. The wars were being fought for the sake of

demonstrating that the U.S. was willing to fight wars, and no coherent strategy or even clear definition of what victory meant or how to achieve it emerged. In a strange way, this made sense. Maintaining the confidence of West Germany, Turkey, Japan and all other U.S. allies was of enormous strategic importance, and Korea and South Vietnam were needed to hold the alliance together. Over 90,000 died in wars that were gestures, yet how many more would have died if the gestures were not made? That was the logic, but the truth is that no one anticipated the length of engagement and amount of bloodshed in either war. Wars fought to reassure allies have no strategic basis on which to calculate such things.

What we will call the anti-jihadist wars were framed differently but had similar results. After 9/11, the U.S. goal was to destroy Islamic jihadists and governments that gave them haven and to impose governments favorably inclined to the United States. The problem was that terrorists are mobile. Al-Qaida was a global, sparse and capable force. It could exist anywhere, including hostile territory, and its members were capable and difficult to locate, making them excellent covert operators, as seen on 9/11.

To dismantle the organization, it was assumed that the U.S. had to deny al-Qaida sanctuary for its operations and have the cooperation of countries in the region, ensuring that they would resist al-Qaida and provide intelligence. The invasion of Afghanistan was designed to displace the Taliban and force al-Qaida to disperse. The Taliban withdrew, dispersed and reformed. Al-Qaida was built to be mobile. This placed a premium on getting others to support the American effort, a difficult task inasmuch as the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon and Somalia made them feel the U.S. wouldn't back them up. In Iraq, there were many strands behind the U.S. invasion, but credibility was an important one. In the end, the problem was that al-Qaida was not destroyed when it had to mobilize. In addition, occupying a country that is hostile to foreign interference is impossible. Even the Nazis couldn't defeat the Russian and Yugoslav partisans, and they were far less gentle than the U.S. was.

Demonstrating credibility was part of what motivated the jihadist wars, just as it motivated U.S. involvement in the wars in Korea and Vietnam. The problem with wars designed to demonstrate U.S. will, however, is that they are almost by definition without end. But if the U.S. is going to lead a coalition, credibility is a critical asset, even if the likelihood of success in the war is uncertain. There is therefore an inherent dilemma. In World War II, the war was aligned with U.S. strategy. In the wars that have been fought since then, the conflicts have not been aligned with U.S. strategy. As a result, stalemate or defeat did not undermine basic U.S. interests. The conflicts created vacuums in regions where the U.S. had interests, but all forces were committed to what I will christen as wars of credibility. These were wars that didn't have to be won, but only fought.

Given the sweeping breadth of U.S. power, and the lack of challengers that might absorb the U.S. as it was absorbed in World War II (including China and Russia), coalition building and management becomes an end in itself. And that leaves the U.S. constantly off balance, as in the long run it undermines coalitions anyway. It was inevitable, therefore, that the U.S. would significantly curtail its military involvement and devote resources to upgrading the force, rather than constant deployment.

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