Learning All the Wrong Lessons: Why an Over-the-Horizon Approach to Counterterrorism Wonâ??t Work

Description

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President Joe Bidenâ??s speech in the wake of the US withdrawal from Kabul was intended to put a seal on a painful chapter in the nationâ??s history.

â??I was not going to extend this forever war,â?• Biden said, while attributing the chaotic departure of US forces from Kabul and the two decades of war that preceded it to a misguided focus on nation building. â??Weâ??ve developed a counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability,â?• Biden insisted, â??that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on the direct threats to the United States in the region and act quickly and decisively if needed.â?•

It was a narrative well suited for an American public jaded by US involvement in wars that many see as a tiresome distraction from domestic issues. But the assumption underlying this narrativeâ??that technology now offers the opportunity to keep extremism at bay without the messiness of commitmentâ??is fundamentally flawed. The idea that the United States can destroy its enemies and restore stability from a distance, without risk, is naturally an appealing prospect for any administration. But it remains, in reality, a tantalizing chimera. Now that the imbroglio of Afghanistan is over, it is time to set the record straightâ??before US foreign policy loses its way yet again.

Decapitation Strategies May Backfire

Despite the presidentâ??s suggestion that the over-the-horizon capability is a new one, the United States has employed remote airstrikes for almost two decades in pursuit of a strategy of decapitation. Unlike close air support for a partner-nation force, the US military has used decapitation strikes to kill terrorist leaders in order to weaken extremist groupsâ?? cohesion. Unfortunately, organizations are composed of human beings whose reactions to such events are seldom linear and predictable. Drone strikes intended to debilitate an organization by removing its leadership can instead have the opposite effect.

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The United States waged what was perhaps its most effective decapitation campaign in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan from 2003 to 2013. Although ostensibly successful, the long-term consequences of this campaign should serve as a cautionary tale for proponents of an over-the-horizon strategy.

The first significant achievement of the campaign was the 2004 US drone strike that killed Nek Mohammed Wazirâ??a prominent al-Qaeda fighter and leader of the largest insurgent group in the region. Although the 2004 strike was a success on the surface, it triggered a chain of events among local insurgent groups that was ultimately counterproductive. Nek Mohammed was replaced by Beitullah Mehsud, who unified five of the largest tribal militias to create the Pakistani Taliban (*Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan*, or TTP). Beitullahâ??a more sophisticated commander than Nek Mohammedâ??widened TTPâ??s sphere of attacks throughout Pakistan, including orchestrating the assassination of presidential candidate Benazir Bhutto in 2007, before being killed by a US drone strike in 2009.

He was succeeded by Hakimullah Mehsud, under whose leadership TTP expanded its attacks outside Pakistan. These included a deadly suicide bombing against the CIA base at Camp Chapman in 2009, an attack on the US consulate in Peshawar in 2010, and an attempted bombing in New Yorkâ??s Times Square the same year. Hakimullah was killed by a drone strike in 2013. The subsequent leadership struggle led to the emergence of the Islamic State *wilayat*, or province, of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This group in turn spawned ISIS-K, which became a significant threat to the US military in Afghanistan, launching a series of lethal attacks, including the August 2021 Kabul airport bombing that killed thirteen US servicemembers and approximately 170 Afghan civilians.

Thus, a campaign of successful drone strikes that began with the assassination of a bush-league tribal insurgent led to a succession of leaders, each of whom was more influential than the last, and ultimately to a vastly more capable organization that continues to threaten regional stability.

The Hydra Syndrome

Killing leaders of an organization like al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, while viscerally satisfying, achieves little in the long runâ??and often makes things worse. Even if the deceasedâ??s successor is not more capable, he is often unknown to security services and motivated by a desire to avenge his predecessor while proving himself worthy of succession.

The pattern seen in Pakistan was no anomaly; it has repeated time and again elsewhere. For example, the greatest period of bloodletting in Iraq occurred after the 2006 death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who commanded al-Qaeda in Iraq. The leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was third in line

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after Zarqawi, the two intervening leaders having been killed by US drone strikes. As the founder of a caliphate that seized a third of Syria and Iraq and attracted an army of some forty thousand foreign fighters, Baghdadiâ??s malign influence eclipsed that of his predecessors.

The Islamic State, like al-Qaeda before it, has clear lines of succession and redundant methods of command and control to minimize disruption after decapitation. And now, with multiple affiliates and the emergent phenomenon of remote radicalization, it is less dependent than ever on a single leader.

This is the problem with decapitation. Unlike Hercules, the United States cannot simply move on to the next taskâ??fighting the Hydra becomes an endless mission.

What Happens Over the Horizon Doesnâ??t Stay There

The TTP example illustrates why US policymakers should care about international extremist groups. Isolationists should take note of this basic rule of counterinsurgency: a force that hunkers down behind the wire cedes initiative to an aggressive enemyâ??who sooner or later will strike inside that wire. This rule applies at any level, from the tactical to the strategic.

Thanks to global integration, disruptive events in distant corners of the world can hurt US interests. Conflict has spillover effects that extend far beyond the national boundaries of the country directly affected. The Syrian civil war, for example, led to the rise of extremist groups, including the Islamic State, and created one of the worldâ??s largest refugee crises. The civil war in Yemen has led to Houthi rebels launching missiles and drones at commercial shipping in the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Reliance on an over-the-horizon model carries indirect risks as well. Drone strikes tend to alienate entire populations, thus threatening US interests in the long run. Such an approach only serves to make terrorist organizations more violent and resilient while ensuring that they have no shortage of recruits from a populace whose only knowledge of the United States is the occasional bolt from the blue that too often claims innocent lives. Most recently, a drone strike intended to stop a second attack on US troops at the Kabul airport instead killed ten Afghan civilians. As Mullah Omari, a Taliban military commander, recounted: â??At first, there was no support for the Taliban. . . . It was when the Americans started killing civilians that people started supporting us, giving us food, bullets, and offering men.â?• These incidents are well known among the local population: allegations of civilian deaths from drone strikes are widely covered by regional media outlets and have become a rallying cry for US enemies. The Pentagonâ??s figures of civilian deaths fall far below those of the leading reputable nonprofit organizations that track such numbers, which does nothing for US credibility among even our closest allies.

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The Biden administrationâ??s emphasis on the over-the-horizon concept reveals a lack of understanding about what causes extremist groups to gain traction among a population that does not necessarily share their views. Such groups derive their strength not from ideology but from their ability to close the gap between local needs and the governmentâ??s ability or willingness to meet those needs. In areas such as Syria, the Sahel, or Somalia, young people flock to join extremist organizations in response to the remorseless effects of climate change, extreme poverty, and a perception that the Islamists offer terms under a social contract that are more reliable than those of the local government. No amount of remote killing can solve that problemâ??it can only make it worse.

Is There a Better Way?

There may be a better approach: recent examples illustrate that intelligent use of the military as part of a comprehensive approach can help partner nations to end conflict and restore stability. Such an approach takes time, however, and requires real determination to understand the nuances of the problem and to subsequently design solutions tailored to fit local circumstances.

In late 1999, for example, the Clinton administration launched a diplomatic and military initiative, Plan Colombia, to end armed conflict and eradicate coca cultivation in Colombia while simultaneously implementing political reform and enabling economic viability. By ensuring that US and Colombian objectives overlapped and were clearly defined, Plan Colombia created unity of effort without putting the US military in the lead. Instead, a light footprint of mostly special operations forces supported diplomatic and political efforts by advising and assisting their Colombian counterparts. The plan took over fifteen years to run its course, but by 2017 Colombiaâ??s main insurgent group, the FARC, had disarmed and cocaine production had dropped by 72 percent.

The plan required strategic patience but not intolerable cost, and it thus escaped the derisive sobriquet of â??nation building.â?• It was, however, designed to enable just that. Of course, Plan Colombia didnâ??t achieve utopiaâ??drug production remains a problem in Colombia todayâ??but overall, the results were impressive.

When it comes to military action in support of a partner nation, the lesson of Colombia is one that has been repeated since in other places, such as in Syria and Iraq during the counter-ISIS campaign. For US policymakers, these campaigns demonstrate how small units, comprising the right people with responsive air support, can have strategic effect at low cost. But for that effect to have longevity, the military effort needs to be integrated into an overall plan.

A Light Military Footprint Carries Heavy Moral Weight

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An influential school of thought argues that any long-term attempt by a Western nation to lead another nationâ??s counterinsurgency efforts is doomed to failure, and therefore US military efforts should focus on advising and assisting local partners and leading them to success without sapping their sense of responsibility. Both Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of counterinsurgency by saturation achieving only short-term objectives. The French experience in Mali bears testament to the same. After initial successes, Operation Barkhane devolved to stalemate, and extremist attacks in Mali have now escalated beyond the levels of 2013 when the French first intervened.

On the other hand, a light military footprint is vastly better than none. Washington failed to realize until too late that even its small residual force in Afghanistanâ??some 2,500 troopsâ??was essential. Not only were they providing security for a NATO force of some 8,500, who left as soon as this guarantee was removed, but more importantly, they represented US resolveâ??thus providing an anchor of assurance for Afghan partners. US policymakers failed to understand this dynamic and too easily criticized the Afghan army for its collapse. Afghanistan is just one example of this phenomenon. In Somalia, an even smaller troop presenceâ??roughly seven hundred special operations personnelâ??kept a large coalition civilian-military effort in the game. The withdrawal of US troops in January had a stultifying effect on missions from the European and African Unions, as well as the United Nations, and halted the efforts of numerous international aid groups. The result was a resurgence of the worldâ??s largest, wealthiest, and most violent al-Qaeda affiliate and the nullification of almost a decade of progress.

Great Nations Act Commensurately

The lesson for US policymakers is clear. Even if they choose to reject the mantle of global leadership, they should not misjudge the tremendous moral weight that US presence confers on any mission. Furthermore, the United States does not have to go it alone; there are usually plenty of other nations willing to participate in a US-led coalition. As a senior diplomat from a North African embassy told me recently, â??My country is eager to follow the United Statesâ?? leadâ??but we are still trying to figure out what that is.â?•

If nation building means implementing country plans aimed at mitigating the conditions that create regional instability and extremism, then surely this is preferable to an over-the-horizon counterterrorism strategy that risks empowering extremist organizations while turning local civilian populations against the United States.

Already, the threat from al-Qaeda and the Islamic State is growing in Afghanistan. Sirajuddin Haqqani â??the leader of the Haqqani Network (a US-designated terrorist organization) and a key interlocutor between the Taliban and al-Qaedaâ??was named interior minister in the transition government,

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signaling ongoing coordination with the extremist group. Meanwhile, the regional branch of the Islamic State has claimed a string of attacks on civilian targets in a challenge to Taliban control. Time is of the essence to counter these terrorist threats without forces on the ground; reverting to a decapitation strategy that has proven to be inefficient or even counterproductive is unlikely to help.

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Main Image: (Staff Sgt. Vernon Young Jr., US Air Force)

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