Obama's Interventions: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya

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In its first 3 years, the Obama administration fully embraced the intervention in Afghanistan it inherited, led a second intervention to its conclusion in Iraq, and initiated a third military intervention in Libya. In all three cases, decreasing American public support for foreign operations and stiff fiscal constraints have focused public attention on the timing and levels of US military involvement in these three countries. While important, the ongoing debate over the allocation of military troops and scarce financial resources obscures a more fundamental question concerning the strategic dimensions of US interventionism. Both judgements of success and the contours of interventionism under Obama will be shaped by the strategic choices taken in Afghanistan, the strategic options available in Iraq after the exit of US troops, and the strategic lessons of US intervention in Libya.

MAKING CHOICES: GETTING AFGHANISTAN RIGHT

As early as February 2009, Obama fully endorsed the conflict in Afghanistan, pitting the conflict against al-Qaida and the Taliban as the 'right war' of necessity in contrast to the 'wrong war' of choice waged in Iraq. By giving priority to the Afghan conflict, Afghanistan became Obama's own war of choice. Between 2009 and 2010, as resources and manpower were being reduced in Iraq, defence funding for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan doubled: from $52 billion to $100 billion. Furthermore, the Obama administration authorised a surge of 33,000 troops in Afghanistan in December 2009, which coupled with further deployments, brought US troop levels in the country from 30,000 to 100,000.

At the same time, the administration confirmed the US and NATO's commitment to a full handover of security responsibilities to Afghan authorities and forces in 2014. To this end, the administration announced a return to pre-surge levels by the end of summer 2012 – with the withdrawal of the first 10,000 US troops by the end of 2011. The decision to withdraw surge troops has been criticised in some quarters for jeopardising the results achieved so far and for being driven more by electoral and fiscal considerations rather than a realistic assessment of both the evolving Afghan security context and the ability of President Hamid Karzai's government to take over security responsibilities in 2014. Yet troop deployments are only part of the administration's strategy in Afghanistan. To assess their utility in Afghanistan and the eventual risks of a return to pre-surge military deployments, it is necessary to evaluate the overarching goal and objectives set by the administration in Afghanistan as well as the strategy employed to meet these objectives. According to President Obama, in order to meet the overarching goal of the defeat of al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the US has sought to 'deny al-Qaida a safe haven'; 'reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government'; and, 'strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they can take the lead responsibility'.

To secure its objectives and assure a smooth transition to Afghan lead, the administration has set forth a 'three track strategy of fight, talk, build'.

In terms of the military campaign, the administration has followed two courses. The surge was intended from the beginning as a short-term deployment aimed at seizing the initiative from the Taliban and improving security conditions on the ground in order to ease the transition process to the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP). Contemporarily, the Obama administration has dramatically increased the number 'kill-or-capture' operations and drone strikes against Taliban and al-Qaida commanders and leaders – most famously against Osama bin Laden – in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2010 alone, the US government has authorised 118 drone strikes compared to the 44 authorised by the Bush Administration between 2004 and 2008.

The combined effect of these two tools paints a rather unsatisfactory picture. On the one hand, the number of attacks initiated by the Taliban dropped by 26% between July and September 2011 compared to the same periods in 2010. However, the very success of the surge pushed the Taliban and other anti-government forces, particularly the Haqqani Network, to increasingly rely on improvised explosive devices (IEDs), targeted assassinations, and high-profile attacks in preference to conventional operations, as demonstrated by the attacks against the US embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul in September 2011 and the killing of Barhuddin Rabbani, head of the Afghan High Peace Council. Importantly, the intensification of military operations in the South and the increased use of IEDs have led to a 15% increase in Afghan civilian casualties in 2010, a trend that has been confirmed also in the first months of 2011. At the same time, the Taliban have also demonstrated their ability to expand their presence and influence over non-Pashtun areas, particularly in the North. So whilst the surge seems to have succeeded in 2011 in seizing the initiative from the Taliban, it has so far failed to counter the Taliban's ability to control new areas or significantly lower the level of insecurity in the country.

Furthermore, the military strategy adopted may also prove counterproductive. First, targeted operations against the Taliban underscore the potential inconsistency between the counterterrorism and stabilisation campaigns pursued by the US. In particular, continued drone attacks on Pakistani soil are fuelling resentment in Pakistani public opinion, running the risk of delegitimising Pakistani state institutions and fostering the very instability that favours al-Qaida and the Taliban. Second, these operations pose direct problems to the second pillar of US strategy; that is, the search for a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan through US direct negotiations with representatives of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. The fundamental challenge with this regard is the lack of consistency between the negotiations track and military operations. Operations against mid- and high-ranking insurgency commanders not only endanger the long-term support of Pakistani authorities in the negotiations process but also run the risk of eliminating important interlocutors among the Taliban leadership, thus making space for younger and more radical commanders.

More importantly, the security situation in Afghanistan highlights significant shortcomings in the US's efforts to expand the institutional capacity of the Afghan government and help the latter increase economic opportunities for Afghanistan. Despite the progress made at the institutional and economic level, efforts in this regard have still failed to bear fruits. Afghan citizens are increasingly concerned by the ruling elite's corruption and the government's inability to guarantee security, or provide jobs and basic services at the local level. Increasing civilian casualties are a stark reminder of the Afghan government's failings in the security arena, despite an increasing number of personnel. The role played by patronage networks and overly-centralised institutional arrangements in a context characterised by stark regional differences and traditional forms of local authority further undermine the legitimacy of the Kabul government, favouring the establishment of shadow Taliban institutions and courts providing security, justice, services, and voice to local authorities.

Thus US strategy in Afghanistan is more challenging than usually recognised by commentators focusing exclusively on the question of troop levels. So far, the surge has had limited effects; more importantly, it has not assured substantial gains in terms of fewer civilian casualties and improved governance. To succeed in its current form, the Obama administration's strategy requires a shift in priorities towards strengthening Afghan capacities and a significant coordination effort to ensure consistency between the different military and non-military tools employed.

SEEKING OPTIONS: IRAQ

Fulfilling a key electoral promise, last October Obama confirmed the withdrawal of the remaining 39,000 US troops from the 'wrong war' in Iraq. America's exit takes place amidst increasing scepticism among American citizens concerning US involvement and security conditions in Iraq that have significantly improved since the 2008. Overall, the Iraqi Army amounts at 271,000 strong, and, in contrast to the Afghan security forces, has demonstrated its ability to control Iraqi territory and conduct operations against anti-government groups and militias, as exemplified by its 2008 operations against Shia militias in Basra. At the political level, the 2010 parliamentary elections demonstrated the vitality of the Iraqi democratic experiment, with a considerable turnout (62%) and increased Sunni participation. This contributed to the narrow victory of Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Movement (INM) over Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition (SLC) and the establishment of a broad coalition government under the latter. Significantly, the INM surprising success gave both voice to Sunni communities and, at least in the short term, impeded a further concentration of power in the hands of al-Maliki, who had already established an alarming degree of control over the country's civilian and military institutions.

Despite this positive outlook, the inability of the Obama administration to secure an agreement with Baghdad to maintain even a minimal presence of US troops in Iraq has been widely criticised. Obama's pledge to withdraw from Iraq coupled with the timetable set by the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed in November 2008 significantly limited the room for an agreement. SOFA set out a clear roadmap for US troop withdrawals, with all remaining US troops due to leave by the end of 2011. Moreover, the possibility of an agreement, even on a residual US force in Iraq, was ultimately made impossible by Iraqi coalition government and particularly the Sadr Movement's opposition to both continued US military presence in the country and the granting of immunity to any remaining American troops.

The withdrawal of US troops may have three consequences for Iraq's internal stability. First, Iraqi security forces' operational capabilities may be hampered and their on-going training programmes significantly slowed down. Second, US troops currently play a role in containing the possibility of renewed tensions among different ethnic and political groups, for instance, performing an important peacekeeping function along the disputed internal border between the Kurdish regions and the rest of Iraq through joint patrols with Iraqi forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga. Similarly, US influence was significant in ending the political impasse created by the 2010 elections, and the fading American influence over Iraqi political actors raises the risk of renewed elite infighting for political power, in a political landscape still characterised by al-Maliki's control over the Iraqi military and progressively altered by increasing numbers of political assassinations.

Notwithstanding these risks, the US is likely to continue to exert considerable influence over these issues even after the exit of US troops. First and foremost, American influence in Baghdad will be guaranteed by the presence of the largest US Embassy in the world. With an overall staff of nearly 17,000, the Embassy, together with the State Department (DoS), will play a central role in channelling political influence, economic aid, and overseeing on-going training operations, particularly the Iraqi Police Development Program (DPD). Furthermore, the DoS could play a central role in the Kurdish-Arab dispute by mediating an agreement between the two parties and, potentially, by favouring an international presence along the internal Arab-Kurdish border within a UN framework. More generally, the DoS will be a key player in determining the practicalities of the Strategic Framework Agreement

signed in November 2008, which provides an overall legal framework for continued US-Iraqi cooperation, not only in the security sector, but also at economic and cultural level. Thus US troop withdrawal will hardly entail American disengagement from Iraq; rather there will be a shift from a military and Pentagon-led mission to a civilian-led mission. The key challenge for the Obama administration will be to provide the DoS with the necessary resources to ensure a smooth transition after December 2011.

Yet the possibility remains of increasing alienation of Iraqi citizens from a ruling elite that, during the negotiations following the 2010 elections, has demonstrated its interest in preserving its power position whilst high levels of corruption and lack of infrastructure continued to blight the lives of Iraqi citizens. Newly adopted anti-corruption legislation highlights Iraqi leaders' awareness of the need to tackle its decreasing legitimacy. However, the government's attempts at improving services have been little more than cosmetic. In July 2011, electricity supply remained at just 52% of estimated national demand. In this regard, the Obama administration's ability to channel US aid to support Iraqi leaders that tackle these problems will be consequential.

A second source of concern is represented by the possibility of increased Iranian influence over Iraq. These concerns tend to overestimate the utility of US troops in countering Iranian influence and simultaneously underestimate the possibilities offered by American military and diplomatic initiatives in the region. First, it is not entirely clear how even a minor US military presence would limit Iranian influence, which is channelled through political connections existing between Teheran and Shia political leaders in Iraq. Furthermore, even after the exit of American troops from Iraq, the US could still rely on its extensive military assets in the Persian Gulf to contain Teheran. As recent reports suggest, the US may also augment its military presence in the Gulf by increasing military coordination with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and by redeploying some of its combat units from Iraq to Kuwait, to be used either in case of conflict with Iran or worsening security conditions in Iraq. Finally, the US is in a unique position to promote constructive relations between Baghdad and the GCC as a means of curbing Iranian influence over Iraq. Present border tensions between Iraq and Kuwait as well as Saudi suspicions towards Iraqi leaders significantly limit Baghdad's access to alternative sources of diplomatic, security and economic support, and increase Baghdad's reliance on Teheran.

Obama can hardly be accused of having lost Iraq. If Iraq is eventually lost to internal unrest or Iranian influence, this would have more to do with the administration's inability both to guarantee a smooth transition to a civilian-led mission in the country and to operate the necessary military adjustments and diplomatic interventions that an evolving internal and regional setting may require.

LEARNING LESSONS: LIBYA

As Iraq shows, profound strategic interests will make it difficult for the Obama administration to disengage and diminish US presence in the Middle East. At the same time, the momentous change brought by the Arab Spring has only increased US strategic concerns in the region. Importantly, the Arab Spring seemed to have called the bluff of a foreign policy that had been predicated until 2011 on a pragmatic approach favouring an accommodation with the existing autocratic regimes in the Middle East. In doing so, the revolutions in North Africa precipitated a shift away from a Realist approach to the Arab world towards a peculiar form of interventionism and support for democratic transitions.

In his May 2011 speech on the Middle East and North Africa, Obama identified the Arab Spring as a 'historic opportunity' that US could seize, not to unilaterally spread democracy, but to support local efforts towards democratic change. In a confirmation of the liberal assumptions of US foreign policy, Hillary Clinton recently reaffirmed the American conviction that 'real democratic change…is in the national interest of the US'. At the same time, she clarified that the US would not intervene when this would entail doing so unilaterally or when military intervention would endanger core interests such as the fight against al-Qaida, the defence of allies, and the secure supply of energy. The result of this position, as manifest in

the Libyan intervention, is a versatile yet potentially contradictory policy approach that mixes realism and idealism, support for revolutionary change, and preservation of the status quo.

Obama's decision to intervene in Libya resulted from the administration's desire to both avert a possible humanitarian disaster in Benghazi as well as to safeguard the revolutionary transitions taking place both in Libya and neighbouring countries. On the one hand, the success of Operation Odyssey Dawn begun on 19 March (later Unified Protector under NATO command from 31 March) and the demise of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's regime presents the US and its allies with the usual challenges of similar post-conflict contexts: the possibility of conflict among victorious local forces, and the need for international support to prop up the newly established regime. At the same time, the Libyan case highlights new dynamics that will likely shape US interventionism in the remaining months of Obama's first term and possibly beyond.

In particular, three elements of the Libyan intervention are worth noting. First, in a clear example of the Obama administration's multilateralist turn, the US intervened only when a legal authorisation was guaranteed, in the form of the UN Security Council Resolution 1973, and in the presence of clear legitimisation and support from both the Libyan National Transitional Council and regional powers, primarily the League of the Arab States and NATO countries.

Second, the shift operated in the early stage of the conflict from US command to NATO command and the more limited role taken by Washington in combat operations, whilst symbolically important to the sense of a new American approach to intervention, should not be overstated. First, US assets were key, in the first days of the operation, in suppressing Libyan air defence system, with the US conducting up to 50% of all coalition strike sorties before the handover to NATO on 31 March. Following this initial phase, the US acted as a key enabler of allied operations, by both continuing air operations via drones and by providing fundamental air-to-air refuelling capabilities; intelligence, surveillance, and targeting assets; and precision-guided ammunitions to its allies. Finally, the US DoS played an important role in both supporting the adoption of the UN Security CounciC resolution and in ensuring the cohesion of the coalition, by helping mediate the differences between the European allies. In this sense, Washington might not have played the role of the protagonist in the Libyan drama, but it fully directed diplomatic and military efforts to their eventual success.

Third, the Libyan case highlights the possibility of intervention amidst public war-weariness and financial constraints. On the one hand, financial constraints did influence US operational decisions and the scale of US involvement but ultimately did not prevent a prolonged military intervention. Simply put, operational costs in Libya, in relative terms, were not exorbitant. Up to 31 July 2011, operations in Libya amounted to $896 million, which would have equalled to $2.7 billion if the operation had continued for an entire year – a much more limited financial request compared to the $107 billion allocated to Afghanistan for 2012. On the other hand, although the operation did not attract extensive public support, it did not attract heated contestations either. On the contrary, available polls indicate that a narrow majority of Americans (47%) approved of military action against Libya against a 37% disapproval rate (Gallup, 22 March 2011).

AFTER INTERVENTION: THE OBAMA DOCTRINE AND ITS LIMITS

The lessons of Libya and the transition processes in Afghanistan and Iraq paint a clear picture of the Obama administration's interventionism – and its underlying doctrine. First, under the current administration the US will likely eschew the possibility of unilateral operations of regime change, yet it remains willing to embark on more limited and multilateral forms of military intervention. The more recent US decision to deploy 100 troops in support of the Ugandan and regional effort against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) provides further evidence of the point. Second, the administration has also demonstrated its willingness to deploy more indirect and covert means of intervention, as exemplified by the increased use of special operations and drones to conduct targeted killings in Pakistan and Yemen, with Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki being the most high profile cases.

In the contours sketched here, the Obama doctrine represents a balancing act: between commitments and costs in age of austerity; between Liberal interventionism and Realist prudence in revolutionary times. However, limited and indirect options might not be available or effective in all contingencies and can easily lead to escalatory processes locking the US into prolonged conflicts. Overreliance on covert operations and limited forms of air operations, in particular, may also fuel the illusion of surgical interventionism, masking the profound political consequences that even limited and covert actions may entail in contexts shaped by complex domestic conflicts.

In all three cases examined here, US strategic choices, more than the levels of US troops in these countries, are having or will have dramatic impact on the target states. But ultimately, US success in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya will hinge on the cohesiveness, legitimacy, and quality of the political leadership of these countries. In this sense, the major limitation of the Obama doctrine is not related to the limited resources employed or to hastened troop withdrawals; rather it derives from its failure in offering a clear strategy on how to use US power to affect the success of those ruling elites in providing security, economic opportunities, and political representation to their citizens following US military intervention.■