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PROSPECTS FOR US INTERVENTION

By Commodore M Anderson, Royal Navy

INTRODUCTION

1. No state, international organisation, major terrorist group or even Somali pirate can remain indifferent for long to the prospect of US military interventionism, whether such action provides an opportunity, a threat or a limitation to freedom of action. Whether you are an ally under pressure to assist, an ideological enemy, a state or organisation concerned with the implications, or simply a bystander reaping the fallout of US action in a globalised world, what the remaining super-power chooses to do or not do impacts on us all. For good or ill, it shapes the world in which we live. While events themselves will inevitably define any future US response, factors that will affect US capacity and will to intervene militarily can be identified. This paper will examine: US character and ideology; recent US interventions; US policy; current US commitments; and the statements of the commanding generation, including the 2008 US Presidential candidates. We will then draw on these factors to examine the prospects for US intervention.

US CHARACTER AND IDEOLOGY

2. Underlying this analysis must run some understanding of who the American people are and what they consider to be their role in the world. In general, when and how might the US public respond to the call for intervention abroad and what will shape this opinion? Even a short period living in the USA reveals the apparent contradictions of an ultra-modern America; it is an overtly moral and increasingly religious society, yet its national structures still reflect the Founding Fathers’ decision to set aside religious test for office or public trust in favour of a simple Oath or Affirmation to support the US Constitution and so separate State from Church. Instead, the ‘American Way’ is, of itself, a strongly held national ‘religion’; an expression of self-belief and determination founded on the moral courage of a relatively young nation, emerging from under distant tyranny, with the space and natural resource to provide opportunity for all, set under a democratically elected government with carefully separated powers, ultimately responsible to the people themselves. These powerful and unique concepts have been enduring and provide the strong sense of nationhood that so effectively binds the disparate US people today.

3. A street plan of the US Capital reflects these ideals, with Congress, and so the American people, set on high, facing down the National Mall toward the Lincoln memorial, the nation’s saviour. While the President, established as a weak executive in the remarkably small White House, faces across to Jefferson’s memorial, the ‘conscience’ of the nation representing its enduring moral values. In the centre lies the memory of Washington, represented by his monument, visible across the city – strength, courage and ideals in the face of overwhelming adversity surrounded by the evocative symbol of a circle of ‘stars and stripes’. Within these confines there is no overt religious symbology or church building to compete with the expression of national self-belief, certainty of purpose and identity; it is a shrine to nationhood. Of course other capitals make similar efforts but

Note:
1 Editor’s Note: This paper was written before the US Presidential election of 2008. Apart from changing the tenses where appropriate the text has not been altered to reflect either the outcome or subsequent events.
2 ‘Armed interventions entail the introduction or deployment of new or additional combat forces to an area for specific purposes that go beyond ordinary training or scheduled expressions of support for national interests.’, Hass, Richard N., Intervention, the Use of American Military Force in the Post Cold-War World, Washington, DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1994, pp.,19-20
3 Article VI of the Constitution of the United States – Philadelphia Convention 1787
the US seem to have exploited it most effectively into a simple expression of national ideology that is singular, confident, pervasive and, most significantly, universally embraced by its people. No US politician can survive or act without echoing this creed. The message must be wrapped in the language of US ideology to be heard. Within the US military it is simply definitive – ‘Duty, Honor, Country’. 5

4. The counter factor to be considered is the US instinct for isolationism. At other points in history similarly strong nations - Germany, Great Britain, Ancient Rome – equally endowed with confidence and self belief, have expanded beyond their borders in search of wealth or ascendency over those they considered inferior. Instead the US has sought a degree of isolationism and mechanisms to curtail its requirement to act, even as its strength in the world increased. Many commenting on US history have seen this as an ill-judged indifference to world affairs, with reluctant intervention delivered overly late and at great cost. An alternative is to consider this attitude as another engrained element of American character, born out of the nation’s unique origins. When the US Constitution was being drafted 90% of the population lived on wide spread and largely independent, family-based farms, very unlike the close village communities of Europe. Despite the unending toil and dangers, the standard of living at the time was probably the highest in the world, with the life expectancy of a 60 year old higher in 1787 than it was in 1970. 6 It is arguable that these characteristics, of independence, a sense of distance from the ‘outside world’ and general contentment with a ‘good life’ continue into the America’s public persona today. A sensible independent assessment (no official figures could be found) puts the number of US passport holders at just 20%, even after a dramatic rise in numbers over the last 15 years. 7 Despite the impact of globalisation, the American public seem broadly content to stay at home and leave the rest of the world to Washington.

5. This national foundation, with its strong concepts of moral certainty, of what is right and wrong, tempered with a continuing instinct for isolationism, provides a basis for understanding US public support for intervention. When they choose to act this certainty goes further and translates into a conviction that other peoples must benefit from US ideals and moral democracy, not least as a means of preventing further conflict involving the US. 8 If US blood and treasure is to be expended overseas, the evangelistic exportation of these ideals is, in itself, a worthy cause in pursuit of ‘Manifest Destiny’. 9 The US people will support military intervention if national interests are affected to a degree that overcomes isolationist instincts and if US values are promoted in the process.

6. For these reasons an executive decision to intervene must be translated and debated in terms of national interest and moral value, and the case will be stronger if expressed in moral tones that appeal directly to US values. US popular support for military action may then come to depend on an overly simplistic language (an ‘axis of evil’, a Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)) if this deeply held belief in what is right or wrong is to be tapped. 10 With the accepted danger of stereotyping, the US likes her enemies obvious and uncomplicated; their opponents in black Stetsons and themselves in white. An inevitable consequence is seen today, with Bush’s Administration unable to move beyond the GWOT narrative for fear of losing a final effective lever of

8 Most significantly in the effort the US made in the post-WW2 reconstruction and democratisation of Germany and Japan.
9 ‘Manifest Destiny’ was originally a term for the western expansion of the USA but evolved into a campaign for spreading (US) democracy and ideals to foreign cultures.
10 As Zbigniew Brzezinski confirms, ‘Constant reference to a "war on terror" did accomplish one major objective: It stimulated the emergence of a culture of fear. Fear obscures reason, intensifies emotions and makes it easier for demagogic politicians to mobilize the public on behalf of the policies they want to pursue. The war of choice in Iraq could never have gained the congressional support it got without the psychological linkage between the shock of 9/11 and the postulated existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. The sense of a pervasive but otherwise imprecise danger was thus channelled in a politically expedient direction by the mobilizing appeal of being "at war.‘ “Terrorized by 'War on Terror”’, Washington Post, 25 March 2007, B01

West Point motto
public support and justification. The flexibility to progress beyond confrontation, through dialogue and reconciliation (for example, with the Taliban or Iran), is constrained by the difficulty of presenting to a domestic US audience an enemy in terms other than was initially presented; an evil and deadly opponent to be killed or captured.

US INTERVENTION SINCE VIETNAM

7. To understand those hard lessons key decision makers draw upon when considering future military options we will need to examine the experiences of recent history. Vietnam is an inevitable starting point, after which we will look at just two (Somalia and Yugoslavia) of the rush of US interventions that followed the end of the cold war, before turning to the impacts of current commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

VIETNAM

8. The pervading legacy of Vietnam on the United States, with the loss of 58,209 dead\(^1\), the need to field a conscript Army of some 500,000 through a prolonged and profoundly unpopular conflict, and the humiliation of retreat in the face of what was perceived as a morally inferior enemy, is well understood and documented. The war’s origins lie in an era of supreme US confidence, with the bright prospect of remoulding Vietnam in the American image. It ended in shattered self-belief and a reinforced isolationist stance, providing a relevant lesson of the cost of failure in the current era. War weariness or reverse will have a medium- and even long-term impact in swinging the US psyche back toward isolation. Less well considered is the impact it had on the US military itself and specifically the generation of officers now holding the highest offices; the commanding generation. As General Schwarzkopf said with such passion in his autobiography:

\[\text{I hated what Vietnam was doing to the United States and I hated what it was doing to the Army. It was a nightmare that the American public had withdrawn its support: our troops in World War I and World War II had never had to doubt for one minute that the people on the home front were fully behind them. We in the military hadn’t chosen the enemy or written the orders – our elected leaders had. Nevertheless, we were taking much of the blame. We soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines were literally the sons and daughters of America, and to lose public support was akin to being rejected by our parents.}^{12}\]

9. Schwarzkopf was closely involved in the moral and physical reconstruction of the ‘all-volunteer’ US Army, with the high personnel quality and educational standards we see today. Admiral Mike Mullen, the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) is of this generation and his remarks reflect the important lesson—not to risk this institution again and, equally important, not to damage the US Armed Force’s direct covenant with the American people.\(^13\)

POST COLD WAR INTERVENTIONS

10. The end of the Cold War saw an emboldened US intervene in Panama, Haiti, Grenada, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq; we will examine two of these interventions for the lessons they provide. Both broke new ground with the overwhelming justification being humanitarian rather than the superpower bloc strategic considerations of the previous period. Both serve to illustrate how US intervention changed and how the relationship with the UN and NATO, and the utility of these organisations to the US, evolved in the post cold war setting.\(^14\)

SOMALIA

11. Somalia is of interest because it was, for the US, a marginal and discretionary intervention

\(^{11}\) Just 6% of overall military losses suffered by all the combatants.


\(^{13}\) ‘To the degree we allow ourselves to disconnect from (the American people), we allow the very foundation upon which our success rests to crumble ... in terms of the moral support so critical to the preservation of an all-volunteer force. Every action we take... must be executed in a way that strengthens and sustains the public’s trust and confidence in our ability and our integrity.’ – Admiral Mike Mullen, CJCS Guidance, 1 October 2007.

\(^{14}\) For brevity, we will need to pass over the unarguable military successes of the first Gulf Conflict, now entangled in the consequences of the second.
decision. The US-led Operation Restore Hope and the two UNOSOM missions provided a ‘victorious’ US with the opportunity to address a dangerous failed state, and an equally emboldened UN to operate without the prior constraints of superpower patronage. As Karin von Hippel described it: ‘When US marines landed on the beaches of Mogadishu in December 1992, international euphoria about building a new world order, led by the lone Superpower, was at its peak due to the demise of communism and the defeat of Saddam Hussein [in Kuwait].’ Yet, despite the expenditure of $2.3 billion by the US and $1.64 billion by the UN, and the deployment of nearly 50,000 foreign troops at its peak, this discretionary intervention ended in disappointment and defeat, for both the US and the UN. The conditions for a US response were established by a highly successful media campaign, supported by those relief agencies and interested members of the US Congress frustrated by the inability to prevent the estimated 350,000 famine related deaths, as food supplies were disrupted by the chaotic internal conflict. An overwhelming cry to “Do Something” was heard at a time when the US felt capable and confident in responding and an already electorally defeated President Bush saw only political advantage. Self confidence and public moral demand overcame the instinct for isolationism.

12. Operation Restore Hope commenced in December 1992 with the aim of protecting food relief, yet it quickly became inveigled in peace enforcement operations, including disarmament of tribal bands and nation-building activities. Following an attack by General Aideed’s forces on a Pakistani UN contingent, with 24 killed and many wounded, the US undertook an all-out man hunt for him that resulted in the death of 18 US Rangers, with 77 wounded, during a night attack on an Aideed compound on 3 October 1993. Shocking media coverage of a dead US soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu quickly translated into strident US public cries of ‘Get Out Now’ and the new President Clinton promised the withdrawal of US forces by March 1994.

SOMALIA LESSONS

13. Somalia demonstrated the undeniable power of media in shaping short-term US public opinion and the effectiveness of organisational lobbying on the US Congress and Executive. Both are more likely to succeed when the US is in a period of historic confidence and has the perceived capacity to act, as was the case here. While its confidence is low and it is trapped in long-term campaigns, as today, the Administration can resist such moral demands with concerns for its thinly spread forces and the need to remain ready for other shocks. In any case, the political ability to stay the course, as time passes and domestic patience erodes, will be dependant on demonstration of US success and enduring US national interest. Otherwise moral demands will fade with cost and time. Secondly, Somalia reinforced Vietnam’s lessons about mission creep and the dangers of embarking on a singular task (in this case food relief) that simply cannot succeed until the larger national crisis is addressed and brought under control.

14. Finally, despite insisting on this being a non-‘blue helmet’ operation, Somalia provided a myriad of examples of poor co-ordination and cooperation both between US agencies, with and within the UN. The US post-mission analysis recognised the need for clear chains of command, for close civil-military/commander-SRSG co-ordination and for a campaign plan that embraced security, governance and economic lines of development; all lessons now being reinforced in Afghanistan. Somalia showed that, institutionally, the UN could not deliver this co-ordination effectively and that only a US lead, backed with substantive US resource, will provide the coherence essential for success and so protect US global authority. So a pre-requisite for US intervention becomes actual or implicit US lead.

THE FEAR OF BODY BAGS?

15. There is little doubt that graphic scenes depicting the loss of US servicemen, in savage circumstances, turned public opinion against the Somalia intervention. Yet loss of life in other actions, such as Panama, caused less furore and, certainly, the US military has always been ready to take the risks their country demands of them. Somalia demonstrates that, in circumstances where the US national interest and moral values are not directly tested, the public will reject intervention as

16 von Hippel, op cit, Chapter 3
a rationale for the loss of US lives. This has echoes of Vietnam but today the response also reflects a direct covenant of support by the American people for the service personnel who so clearly represent their nation’s moral values. Politicians should not be allowed to squander US lives for no good reason. This re-coupling of military risk exposure to the degree of national interest at stake reinforces the isolationist counter to emboldened US adventurism.

**FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**

16. Throughout the prolonged period of conflict Former Yugoslavia has endured (March 1992, arguably to the present day), the US has demanded that direct military risk lie with regional European forces and has generally limited its own involvement to air and maritime strike, and the provision of high-technology and high-capacity enablers, such as C2 and lift. Freed of Cold War considerations, US interests were not seen as sufficiently demanding to commit large-scale ground forces; responsibility lay firmly with the Europeans, a view key EU players (Germany and France) saw as a test of strength for the emerging EU community. The US had its hands full with Iraq and Somalia; Europe could handle this one. At the time this put in doubt the very utility of large-scale US ground forces, compared with air power, to a level that has only been reversed with the prolonged occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan:

"The professional model of what (US) troops should do, along with the administration’s fear of casualties, meant that at the start of hostilities in Kosovo in 1999, President Clinton said ‘I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war.’ US troops were shown to have little political utility because, as with Bosnia and Haiti, soldiers would not be deployed until the conflict was finished."18

18. Eventually, the US was forced to act, both to demonstrate its own authority within NATO and to preserve the credibility of the Alliance; a situation not dissimilar to the one that faces us today in Afghanistan.

**THE UNITED NATIONS IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**

19. The UN also favoured a European lead but became increasingly engaged in support of humanitarian efforts, with the deployment of UNPROFOR on 21 October 1992. While the original force of 6,500 quickly grew to 38,000 by the end of 1994, its peace-keeping mandate was inadequate to meet the peace-enforcement role that was increasingly required. Again the mission was addressing a symptom and not the disease itself. The flood of UN resolutions generated in response (49% of all UNSCRs issued in a forty year period) failed to address the underlying problem. UNPROFOR had neither the means nor the mandate to address the massive humanitarian crisis unfolding before it.20 UNPROFOR lacked the required firepower, unity of command or density of force to intervene usefully. Often, it was barely able to protect itself while the civilian population suffered tragically in front of its soldiers and the world’s media. The lesson for an America determined to protect the authority and standing of its military capability is to avoid exposure of its

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17 As Jacques Poos, former Head of the EU Presidency said, this was ‘the hour of Europe, not America.’ *The Economist,* 22 March 1997, p 50.
19 von Hippel, op cit, p 134
20 Which the US shares responsibility for as a permanent member of the Security Council.
forces to unclear policy or ineffective command, be it under the UN or NATO. Clearly, it will prefer the legitimacy of an UN mandate for its actions where it can (always preserving the option for unilateral action where its national interests are threatened) but this will be to establish the operating space within which a US-led force will operate, not to be exposed to inadequate UN direction.

AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

20. The position following these post-Cold War experiences is well summarised by a previous CICS, John Shalikashvili in 1997, when he expressed the instances when the US might consider military intervention. In doing so he clearly acknowledged the underlying importance of US interests, moral ideology and military risk:

First in priority are our vital interests – those of broad, overriding importance to the survival, security and territorial integrity of the United States. At the direction of the NCA, the Armed Forces are prepared to use decisive and overwhelming force, unilaterally if necessary, to defend America’s vital interests.

Second are important interests – those that do not affect our national survival but do affect our national well-being and the character of the world in which we live. The use of our Armed Forces may be appropriate to protect those interests.

Third, armed forces can also assist with the pursuit of humanitarian interests when conditions exist that compel our nation to act because our values demand US involvement. In all cases, the commitment of US forces must be based on the importance of the US interests involved, the potential risks to American troops, and the appropriateness of the military mission.21


22. In response to 9/11, the US attacked the Taliban and AQ in Afghanistan with extraordinary efficiency, matching a relatively small and specialised ground-based footprint to the weight of their high-tech, stand off strike capacity, while sub-contracting the bulk ground work to US-sponsored, Afghan ‘warlords’. There was overwhelming western support and sympathy for the US, yet the resultant declaration by NATO of an Article V response was treated with near disdain as they chose to include in the conflict only those nations they were confident could contribute to high-end intervention at their level. While this is an indication of the relative utility of allies in high-tech conflict, many in the US now recognise that this was a mistake, contributing in major part to the difficulties the US has had in recruiting NATO allies to the fighting in Afghanistan.


23 Some leaders in the US are ready to lose the term GWOT, which can be readily interpreted as a war on Islam and so feed the al-Qaeda narrative. But such a move was totally unpalatable to the Bush Administration’s Executive, which had built US public support on the impression of war. Sevastopulo, Demetri, ‘Security Chief Decrees ‘War on Terror’’, Financial Times, 29 May 2008.
INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN

23. On 7 October 2001, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was launched by a US-led ‘coalition of the willing’, to detain or destroy the AQ terrorists responsible for 9/11, being harboured and supported by the Taliban regime. Special Forces’ teams (working to the CIA) on the ground liaised with some pretty ugly Northern Alliance and Pashtun warlords to overthrow the Taliban regime in Kabul and replace the government, while other teams focussed on the destruction of terrorist training camps and capture of the elusive Osama Bin Laden. The hostile terrain of Afghanistan would have made a large-scale ground campaign far too costly (as the Soviets had learnt during their decade-long struggle in the 1980s) but the use of high technology and overwhelming air power, commanded from CENTCOM in Tampa, proved hugely effective. Of the US close allies, only the UK had the means to achieve token participation in the initial air and cruise missile strikes. This light ground footprint and indigenous allies, combined with the aggressive use of excessive amounts of firepower achieved rapid success. Yet as the campaign expanded to continue the pursuit of the elusive AQ leadership and the Taliban, and to the securing, governance and reconstruction of a completely devastated and medieval country, the use of large-scale ground forces became inevitable.24

24. Efforts to share this ground burden led to the deployment of multi-national forces and eventual transfer of responsibility for security to NATO, under UN mandate. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), initiated in February 2004, gradually assumed command of stabilisation and security operations, in support of the Afghanistan Government. Separately, Enduring Freedom continued as a US-led operation, focussed on the pursuit of AQ and the training of Afghan Security Forces to allow US drawdown. Today the security situation remains fragile outside the main areas of development and particularly in the Pashtun belt straddling southern and eastern Afghanistan. While, in the Tribal Areas of north-west Pakistan huge refugee populations, displaced during the Soviet conflict, provide the Taliban with a seemingly endless opportunity to refresh and resupply their forces in Southern Afghanistan.

25. By May 2008, ISAF had an estimated 47,000 troops on the ground from 40 countries (17,000 from the US, primarily in Regional Command (East) (RC (E)). To many, NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan is an indication of the alliance’s continued relevance in the post-Cold War era. For others, NATO’s performance in Afghanistan has been a mixed success, raising questions of member nation’s military capability, political will and staying power in the face of the long-term task of securing and rebuilding a nation pretty much from scratch.25 Nowhere is this criticism more vociferous than in Washington. In the run up to the NATO Summit in Bucharest, in February 2008, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates struggled unsuccessfully to temper his criticism of NATO nations. In letters to all 25 nations, leaked by an irate German government, he demanded they remove the caveats that prevented their troops operating in high risk combat areas and provide the troop numbers required by COMISAF to support the mission. Gates criticised the NATO operation as reflecting a ‘two-tier alliance’, divided between those willing to take casualties (US, UK, Canada, NL, Denmark) and those who are not (with a politically constrained Germany the prime target).26 While Bucharest patched up these overt differences, the constraints remain and the US will be considering what this means for the utility of NATO to this and future operations.

25 Canada, one of the handful of nations involved in actual warfighting, has suffered 82 fatalities in its 2,500 strong force, a death rate higher than the US military in Iraq. 47% of Canadians want their troops home immediately, with only 17% supporting a continued combat role. Canadians worry that fighting alongside the US increases, rather than decreases, their risk from terrorism. In March 2008, after a heated parliamentary debate, Canada decided to keep troops in theatre until 2011, with the proviso that they must be reinforced by 1000 NATO troops and move away from combat missions to other tasks.  

26 ‘We must not – we cannot – become a two-tier alliance of those willing to fight and those who are not. Such a development, with its implications for collective defense, would destroy effectively the alliance’ – Defense Secretary Robert Gates speaking at Munich Conference on Security Policy, 9 February 2008

26. In many ways US criticism is justifiable. A recent UK survey shows that European NATO has some 1500 helicopters, of which only 500 are deployable and just 44 meet the exacting operational standards required to participate in Afghanistan (these coming largely from the ‘fighting’ nations). The US sees this as resulting from decades of investment in the wrong equipment and a further example of old Europe ‘freeloading’ on the US security guarantee. They also see 16,500 NATO troops still operating in the far more benign Kosovo, with no appetite to rebalance these forces into the campaign professed to be NATO’s highest priority. Most NATO forces rotate their troops every 6 months and their commanders every 9, providing significant loss of continuity compared with the longer US tours. Moreover, delivery of a comprehensive Counter Insurgency (COIN) campaign is seen by Washington as far more effective, consistent and closely integrated between civil and military in the US-led RC (E) than in the areas controlled by other, often nationally rotating, regional commands. The US is concluding they need to up their game and take on prime responsibility for the Pashtun belts, streamlining command and control and increasing the pace of delivery – but this requires more US troops.

27. US COIN doctrine states the need for a high troop to population ratio (40:1) to provide security among the people, as a clear enabler for governance, reconstruction and economic development. Afghanistan is far from these levels, despite the rapid growth of the Afghan Army and the continuing presence of some 18,000 US forces under OEF, in addition to their ISAF contribution. A demand for an extra 3,500 troops now (for training and mentoring the security forces under CSTC-A), on top of NATO requests, is already accepted. US officials say they need at least 3 more Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) or 10-12,000 troops over the next 2 years, but these will remain unavailable until there is significant drawdown in Iraq. In June 2008, US monthly casualties in Afghanistan exceeded those in Iraq for the first time.30

INTERVENTION IN IRAQ

28. It is for others to debate why the US moved on so quickly from Afghanistan to the unfinished business of Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein. We will confine ourselves to examination of the consequences of five years of operations in Iraq (six years in Afghanistan) on US capacity and will to intervene in the future.

29. The pace and efficiency of the US led invasion of Iraq, on 22 March 2003, was an endorsement of overwhelming military power, delivered by those capable of close interoperability at the high end of conflict. The involvement of allied forces of any lesser capability would have caused delay, confusion and, potentially, severe loss of life. If you could not operate at this level you were simply not allowed to enter the battle-space. This success will carry significant lessons for future intervention at this level. What followed carries its own, much more difficult lessons, many of which the US military have learnt very painfully. As an occupying force, they have had to fight a large-scale, internal Iraqi insurgency, complicated and inflamed by Iranian interference, and a significant AQ terrorist threat, from which they are, arguably, only now emerging. The war in Iraq has claimed over 4000 US lives and cost an estimated $600bn since 2003. It is widely unpopular at home, with a March 2008 CNN poll showing that two-thirds of the country oppose the conflict, although this has since been ameliorated with continuing security successes. Throughout the occupation, the US has struggled to maintain an effective multi-national coalition in Iraq, as much to demonstrate international support as to share the burden of securing Iraq. Steadily, that coalition has diminished as patience with the US and with the prolonged conflict has eroded. The US is counting its friends; for example, Georgia, with 2000 troops undertaking credible missions

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27 Earlier in 2008, Gates threatened to withdraw the 1500 US troops in Kosovo but was ‘not sure how serious he was’.
28 CSTC-A – Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan operates under OEF
30 White, Josh, ‘A Shortage of Troops in Afghanistan’, Washington Post, 3 July 2008, p 1
31 For example, without Mode 5 IFF aircraft were unable to launch from ships. US focus and insistence on limiting friendly loss of life in the face of an outmatched enemy was stark.
32 CNN.com article, Bush backs pause in withdrawals from Iraq, accessed 21 May 08
with great willingness, is earning far more US gratitude than many traditional western allies.33

IMPACT ON US INTERNATIONAL STANDING

30. The US-led invasion of Iraq has damaged US international standing and severely tested NATO credibility, as the often bitter split between western allies over the wisdom and even legality of military action erupted into public displays of condemnation. As Paul Cornish commented, ‘The political and military campaign against Saddam Hussein’s regime exposed to public view deep and seemingly unbridgeable divisions between the United States and some European allies, and within Europe.’34 While relations may have recovered in the intervening years at a government level, distrust of US unilateralism and military capability, remain evident in public commentaries around the globe. This will impact on international acceptance of future US interventionism. Even the UK may find it harder to intervene alongside the US, unless both Parliament and the public are convinced of the national interest, or a compelling breach of international law or human rights.35 Attempts to soften this image are already apparent, for example, emphasis on the humanitarian missions the US military can undertake, such as maritime deployment of military aid into disaster areas (if indeed even this is welcome).

IMPACT ON THE CREDIBILITY OF US INTELLIGENCE

31. Low US public confidence in their own national intelligence apparatus matches their lack of trust in the Bush Administration’s political leadership, which took them to war on the basis of false or improperly assessed intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and non-existent ties between Iraq and AQ. Neither the 9/11 commission report or the US Senate Intelligence Committee found any link between Saddam and 9/11 (collaborative links in the 1990s between Iraq and AQ were judged to be non-operational). The Senate Intelligence Committee concluded the National Intelligence Report on Iraq’s Continuing Programs for WMD was either overstated or unsubstantiated. No WMD stocks were found by the time the Iraqi Survey Group was quietly stood down in November 2004.36 This confirmed US public opinion and led directly to the loss of both Houses of Congress to the opposing Democrats in the 2006 elections, in the hope that Congress would stop the war and bring US troops home.37 That rejection remains unchanged and has become only recently secondary to concerns over the US economy. It is tempered only by the strong covenant between the US armed forces and their public, and the relative military successes of the past year. Only high regard for the ‘all-volunteer’ army suppresses the real degree of protest over this war and prevents the sort of demonstrations seen in the final years of Vietnam. If US public support for a future US military intervention is dependant on intelligence, the ruling Administration will find itself subject to a critical examination and scepticism it may not be able to satisfy in open forum.38 If it retires behind closed doors, public trust, both at home and internationally, will remain heavily tarnished, providing clear opportunity for opponents to exploit.

CONTINUING COMMITMENTS

SURGE IN IRAQ

32. In January 2007, President Bush reversed the ambition of a rapid return to Iraqi responsibility for internal security and announced a surge of some 30,000 extra troops, adding to the 130,000 already in theatre. This short-term expedient, intended to arrest growing violence by bring security closer to the population in the critical and deteriorating areas of Baghdad, and Al Anbar province, raised the number of US Brigade Combat

33 Cashed in over the summer of 2008 in the form of strong US support for Georgia joining NATO.
37 Although, more than twenty attempts since then to check the Bush Administration over Iraq and bring troops home have failed in the face of Presidential veto and public support for US forces themselves.
38 The ill-judged exposure of the Iraq Nuclear Weapon NIE was, in itself, articulation of this fear by the intelligence community.
Teams (BCTs) in Iraq from 15 to 20. It extended the tour lengths of many US units to an unprecedented 15 months, with only a year between deployments, placing further pressure on an already hard-pressed land force. New force levels were achieved by the middle of 2007. A year on there is common acceptance that the ‘surge’, combined with advances in US COIN doctrine and application has been effective.39 Despite individual incidents, violence is at a four-year low and AQ in Iraq is severely weakened. Political progress by the Iraqi Government has been more disappointing.

33. Enhanced US presence on the ground, while welcome in many areas enjoying peace for the first time in years needs to be followed up with economic and civil structure improvements at a local level, before patience with poor economics and governance expires. The US must transfer responsibility to an effective Iraqi security force promptly before this improved good will turns against them, as a continuing and visible force of occupation. Yet neither the Force Commander, General Petraeus (MNF-I) nor his Corps Commander, Lt Gen Austin (MNC-I, previously Gen Odierno)40 seem ready to return control to the Iraqis, given previous experience of precipitate withdrawal in, say, Mosul, or the UK experience in Basra. This despite increasing signs of over confidence by Iraq’s President al-Maliki in his own internal security capability. Underscoring this was the Bush Administration’s determination to achieve the maximum progress possible from these high force levels, before a potential Obama Executive ordered significant drawdown.

FUTURE COMMITMENT TO IRAQ

34. This reluctance to ‘let go’ in Iraq is evident in the figures. While the US has announced a reduction back to 15 BCTs by July 2008, troop numbers will remain some 12,000 higher than before the ‘surge’, at 142,000, retaining the critical enablers to sustaining forward presence. Following the announcement that further reduction is on hold after July, it seems likely force levels will remain high to the end of this Presidency, possibly to retain some margin for reduction by the new incumbent. Petraeus was ‘confident’ that by September 2008 he would be able to order more troop withdrawals, but as Bush said, ‘I’ve told him he can have all the time he needs.’41 Some said the Administration was only acceding to the withdrawals it had to undertake, as surge levels were simply unsustainable without extending tours yet further.

35. Yet there was a problem; the Chapter VII UNSCR mandating the Coalition presence in Iraq expired at the end of 2008. If the US was to remain it needed to negotiate a Status of Forces Agreement that provided it with freedom of action to pursue its goals, and immunity for its personnel. At the time of writing, (mid summer 2008) this negotiation, within the wider chapeau of a bilateral Security Arrangement, was (reportedly) not going well, yet it was inconceivable that this Iraqi government would leave itself without the protection of US forces at the end of the year, not least from internal opponents. Some agreement would be forthcoming, although whether it could be extended sufficiently to encourage the remainder of the multinational coalition to stay was very doubtful. Given delays in the negotiation, it seemed likely that any agreement would become a major issue for the November US election, with accusations that Bush was tying the future Administration’s hands.

36. It seems likely the US will remain in Iraq for several more years, initially at around 10 BCT and 100,000 personnel, while the Iraqi security forces complete taking control of internal security, and develop the capacity to secure their own borders and buffer Iran. While Congress will block any US/Iraq treaty guaranteeing security and will not allow permanent basing, long-term basing (akin to South Korea) is probable, not least given the access this gives the US to the wider Gulf region, from a handful of well-found and secure Iraq bases.

39 If serendipitous with other developments, such as the Sunni rejection of AQ and the long term ceasefire imposed on the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) by Moqtada al-Sadr.
40 MNF-I, Multi National Force in Iraq, the overall strategic commander. MNC-I, Multi National Corps in Iraq, the operational commander in charge of execution.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN

37. After the Bucharest Summit in February 2008, the US realised that NATO would only make slow progress in improving its expeditionary capacity and would have continuing difficulty sustaining its commitment to the mission, most critically in the difficult south. Canada and Holland, ‘fighting nations’ with difficult coalition governments, have indicated that they will drawdown or remove their forces in the period 2010-12. To hasten progress in the southern commands and replace departing forces, the US must increase their own contribution and will almost certainly then seek greater coherence of command, in US hands, in RC(S) and RC(E); a ‘re-americanisation’ of the combat mission. The current deployment of some 3,400 USMC from 24 MEU, which was extended to October 2008, could be seen as a precursor to this (as well as reflecting the desire of the Corps Commander, General Conway, to see his force released from static duties in Al Anbar, Iraq, back to the manoeuvre warfare it trains for).

OVERSTRETCH OF THE LAND FORCE

38. Since 9/11, 1.7 million US service personnel have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan; nearly 600,000 more than the initial deployment. Indeed, of the Army’s 44 combat brigades, 19 have now had 3 tours and 6 have completed four tours. A comprehensive open-source review of the critical state of US ground forces was presented by Lawrence J Korb of the left-leaning Centre for American Progress, to the House Committee on the Armed Services on 16 April 2008. In his testimony he concluded that the US Army was stretched to breaking point and that their readiness to fight other conflicts effectively was in doubt. Senior US Army officers have stepped short of saying the land force is broken but accept that most indicators will only warn of failure after it becomes inevitable. Yet media reports already link 15 month tours with the 50% increase in reported Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) cases in 2007 over previous year– ‘As many as 30% of deployed soldiers suffer symptoms of PTSD’. Army Chief of Staff, General George Casey is quoted as saying, in September 2007, ‘Our Army is out of balance ... the current demand for our forces exceeds the available supply. We are consumed with the need to meet the demands of the current fight and are unable to provide ready forces as rapidly as necessary for other potential contingencies.’ Six months later his outgoing Vice Chief, General Richard Cody said, ‘I’ve never seen our lack of strategic depth be where it is today. Our readiness is being consumed as fast as we can build it.’ Korb also quotes General Abizaid, a former CENTCOM, stating that the all-volunteer force was not ‘built to sustain a long war.’ In the event of a protracted conflict the government is expected to reinstitute the draft, a course clearly unacceptable given public rejection of the Iraq conflict.

39. In January 2007, Secretary of Defence Gates announced an increase of 27,000 in the size of the US Marine Corps (USMC) and 65,000 in the US Army; acknowledgement, if needed, that the land force faces long-term commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Recruiting this force will be difficult. While figures for 2007/8 remain on target, recruiters have dug deep into future years sources and there are growing concerns about the relaxation of educational requirements and the acceptance of criminal record waivers on the quality of the ‘all-volunteer’ force. Even if recruits are forthcoming, the resulting increase in the ground force will not be achieved before 2012.

40. Traditionally, the USMC has provided a sea-based contingency force, secured on enduring US maritime hegemony. The afloat MEU (Marine Expeditionary Force) remains the military ‘911’ force of choice and provides a ready capacity for military intervention at a small scale. But the USMC has also suffered the effects of long-term operations in Iraq, where it has garrisoned the difficult al-Anbar province. For example, the Corps now has large number of marines who have never served at sea and has acquired numerous

43 In assessing the long term medical and social costs to the US of 1.7m Iraq/Afghan Veterans it is perhaps worthwhile remembering that the last US WW1 Veteran is still alive.
mine-resistant vehicles that improve its force protection but have limited its manoeuvrability. The USMC seems determined to recover this capability loss as soon as possible and will be a leading indicator of the reset of US ready forces.

US STRIKE CAPACITY

41. As the campaign in Afghanistan demonstrated, the US retains massive strike potential that provides global reach, through continuing US maritime hegemony and global basing. This strike capacity provides a high-end option of intervention through surgical strike and pre-emptive self defence but cannot substitute the need to take and hold ground to combat the failing states that harbour the terrorism that threatens the USA. Still, it provides at one level a powerful, if limited intervention capacity that cannot be disregarded.47

US DEFENCE COSTS

42. Recent events have seen the Defence Budget under President Bush increase from 3% of GDP in 2000 to 4.05% in 2006, or some $617bn. The request for 2008 is $695bn, including GWOT elements.48 Yet, at the time of writing, it was unlikely that either of the two Presidential candidates would sustain this expenditure, given the current state of the US economy. Funding would plateau at best and might fall. And there would be significant costs in restoring and resetting the ground element, over the ongoing costs of current commitments. The Government Audit Office (GAO) estimated that resetting and re-equipping the expanded land force would cost a further $191.2bn. Some significant impact on the remainder of the US equipment programme seems inevitable, with major projects at risk.

UTILITY OF COALITIONS AND ALLIANCES

NATO

43. Inside the Pentagon, US views on the utility of NATO split in two – those with NATO in their job title press for transformation of the alliance and call for patience from their colleagues as NATO makes the transition from continental collective defence to expeditionary intervention. The remainder see it as a growing irrelevance, with little real utility to the immediate military missions the US is currently burdened with. Professor Andrew Bacevich captured the mood of many in Washington in February 2008 when he said, ‘NATO is no longer a fighting organisation ... if the alliance retains any value, it is as an institution for consolidating European integration and prosperity. No amount of US browbeating is going to change that. The Bush administration is kidding itself if it thinks the Europeans are going to save the day in Afghanistan’.49 The US recognise they will have to take up the extra burden themselves – no one else is coming to help.

44. This sentiment rarely emerges above the surface because the US wishes to retain NATO as a means of engaging in the still vital security of Europe, and because the alliance does retain some utility for them. It provides them with forward basing, cheap training and barrack facilities, and it has a proven capacity, be it at the lower end of expeditionary conflict as shown in northern Afghanistan today. To this end we could expect some fence-mending by the future leadership. In more demanding environments the US goes alone or with a few capable Allies (including increasingly Australia) and those Eastern Europeans desperate to exchange their force contributions for implied security guarantees from the remaining super-power. It remains to be seen if NATO’s utility is sufficient for the US to retain 67,000 military personnel in Europe at a time of such overstretch, or whether their visible commitment to NATO will further erode. As Paul Cornish said in 2004 – ‘The US government seems to be more than disappointed and irritated by some of its European allies; it appears to feel betrayed’.50 The utility of NATO to the US is now in question. ‘If NATO fails to transform, then the US will continue to prefer ad hoc US-led ‘coalitions of the willing’ over the (NATO) alliance... It will strive to reduce European NATO to a peacekeeping and stabilisation and

47 US Strike Capacity –57 SSNs and 12 Strike carriers, 52 DD and 11 AirWings, 10 Stratcom Squadrons, 36 Fighter, 10 Attack/FAC and 32 FGA squadrons. – IISS, ibid.
48 ibid.
50 Cornish, Paul, op cit, p 2.
reconstruction role and to preserve the high-intensity combat role for itself.\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{COALITIONS OF THE WILLING}

45. From a US perspective, it would be easy to see the few, first-tier NATO nations, ready to operate within Southern Afghanistan without constraint, as an effective ‘coalition of the willing’, yet burdened with the difficulty of NATO C2. In Iraq the US has struggled to retain a meaningful multi-national coalition, with the will of some key European partners quickly fading along the way. The preponderance of Eastern or emerging European nations that remain, exchanging presence for US good will in support of their own security concerns, is striking\textsuperscript{52}. It is interesting to note that US National Defence Strategy makes no specific mention of NATO but emphasises that ‘international partnerships continue to be a principal source of our strength’\textsuperscript{53} and both this and the Quadrennial Defence Review stress the importance of interoperability with other nations – but will this increasingly be coalitions of the willing and close allies rather than alliances?

\textbf{US STRATEGY}

46. To examine future security strategy under which the next intervention decisions will be made we will need to look beyond the existing commitments that dominate the efforts of US forces and consider what the next administration will need to do. As Mullen said in October 2007 when he took office, ‘The demands of current operations, however great, should not dominate our training exercises, educational curricula, and readiness programs ... The conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq will one day end. We must be ready for who and what comes after’.\textsuperscript{54} This is an interesting pointer to the judgements of the one man who will remain on the National Security Council when it reconvenes after the new President takes office on 22 January 2009. More comprehensive is the guidance he laid out for the Joint Staff when he took over as CJCS, setting the agenda of work to manage the transition of power.\textsuperscript{55} In this he set 3 priorities and strategic objectives:

\textbf{Develop a strategy to defend our interests in the Middle East}

- This recognises the immediate concerns in Iraq and Afghanistan but looks beyond them to Iran, Israel-Palestine, Sunni-Shia rivalries and the rise of radical jihadists. Importantly, it seems to recognise that, following the invasion of Iraq, US Middle East strategy adopted by the next administration will need to be reconstructed from scratch.

\textbf{Reset, reconstitute and revitalize our armed Forces ... particularly the ground forces}

- This emphasis on maintaining an accurate assessment of the health of the land element and the calculating the resource cost of regaining full-spectrum capabilities across all US forces, is a substantial reflection of the challenge involved. CJCS clearly feels his immensely capable all-volunteer forces are under great pressure, particularly on the personal and family front, and he must find means to relieve the deployment burden; specifically a dwell ratio no greater than 1:1 moving to 1:2, even while at war. Secondly, appears to acknowledge his force is off balance; overly focussed on a COIN mission, ill-equipped and ill-prepared to face the next shock, wherever that comes from.

\textbf{Properly balance Global Strategic Risk}

- A larger, longer-term risk assessment that balances US forces across its enduring commitments and yet preserves the core war-fighting skills, resources and partnerships to conduct operations across the full spectrum of conflict. A return to precision, speed and agility. Flexibility, technical dominance and freedom of manoeuvre to meet novel and unexpected threats as they arise. This is far from the image of 170,000 US troops currently garrisoning Iraq and Afghanistan.

\textsuperscript{51} Forsberg, T. and Herd, G.P., op.cit., p 50.
\textsuperscript{52} Of the 25 nations represented, 15 could be said to fall into this category, www.mnf-iraq.com, accessed 27 June 2008
\textsuperscript{54} IISS. The Military Balance 2008. op.cit., Chap 1
47. In short, US strategy seems eager to move beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, while managing those ongoing and probably enduring commitments. In the longer-term, it is likely to seek to rebalance and recover what forces it can release from these theatres to reset expeditionary forces held at readiness for the next challenge. Within diminishing defence expenditure and with such great stretch in the ground force, this would seem to mitigate against any further ground-holding intervention in the medium term. As an influential US 3* said, ‘We’re not going to be invading anymore countries in a hurry’!

IRAN

48. Iran will remain an important focus for US strategy. It challenges America across the breadth of the Middle East, through support to its surrogates, Hamas and Hizbullah, through influence in Syria, through its sway over Iraq’s prime minister Maliki and through lethal aid to southern Shia militias and the Taliban; and even in direct confrontation with the US Navy in the Straits of Hormuz. Moreover, it seems to be winning, establishing a broad-based deterrence through the threat of retaliation across the region, and, dangerously, Iran neatly meets the US ideological requirement for simple, evil enemies. Its President, Mahmoud Ahmadinijad incensed the American public during his last US visit in a manner that was clearly calculated to provoke the most outspoken response for consumption at home in Iran; he was not disappointed. When Iran is raised in discussion, US dialogue simplifies. As a US Ambassador recently commented, ‘we have this thing with Iran and they have a thing with us.’ The question for the next administration is do they talk to Iran or not. Barack Obama favours dialogue, although this will be hugely unpopular with some at home, but it is unclear what leverage he would hope to employ. What the US military must do is preserve the threat of a ‘big stick’. Admiral Mullen has emphasised the importance of diplomatic, financial and international pressures to force Iran to change its course but also stated that ‘while a third conflict in this part of the world would be extremely stressing for us ... it would be a mistake to think we are out of combat capability’. So, while a limited US response to a specific Iranian action in Iraq or Afghanistan remains possible, a major ground intervention against Iran seems most unlikely, leaving the option of surgical strike. Given the evident tensions, a miscalculation by either party, or a third party, seems the greater risk.

THE NEXT PRESIDENCY

49. Before attempting the uncertain business of extracting policy intent from the campaign statements of presidential candidates, it is worth considering the impact of transition on the remaining super-power. When Congress rises in September it will not sit again until January 2009. With the removal of this President some 6000 key decision makers – Under Secretaries, Ambassadors, Advisors – will leave office; many have left already. It will take months for their replacements to be nominated and approved. In May 2008, Admiral Mullen warned that the transition to the new Presidency will mark a ‘time of vulnerability’ as the US fights two wars. He is certain ‘we will be tested’, and he hopes the transition will proceed at a ‘wartime pace’ rather than a peacetime one.57 We can expect a period of heightened tensions, even hostilities, with the possibility of unilateral action by Israel against Iranian nuclear installations during the transition a high-impact risk.

IRAQ

50. In both the Senate and on the campaign trail, Senator McCain was consistent in his support for US presence in Iraq. He saw the country as the central front on the war on terrorism and took a ‘we are where we are attitude’ that moved beyond the reasons for conflict to resolve that US defeat at the hands of AQ in Iraq is unacceptable. The US ‘must stay for 100 years if necessary.’ Speaking on Memorial Day 2008, the traditional opening of the presidential campaign, he vowed not to waver, ‘... even if I must stand athwart popular opinion. As long as there is a reasonable prospect of succeeding in this war then we must choose not to lose it.’ In contrast, Senator Obama, acknowledged his, ‘... intention is to bring this war in Iraq to a close and to start bringing home our

troops in an orderly fashion.’ he mentioned 16 months. 58 Yet how much flexibility will the next President really enjoy? Both candidates wished to move rapidly beyond the Bush legacy but, faced with likely enduring commitments to the security and stability of the emerging Iraqi state, it seems the difference could be little more than a token acceleration in withdrawal the Pentagon has already accounted for, and a faster disengagement of US troops from front-line security duties. Speed not end state seem to be the differences, with the numbers and bases in Iraq set to remain as currently predicted.

AFGHANISTAN

51. Obama referred to Afghanistan as ‘the right battlefield’ and could be expected to strongly support an increased US effort. More importantly, he saw the tribal regions of Pakistan as a terrorist sanctuary the US cannot tolerate. McCain would have been unlikely to give Afghanistan greater priority while there was still risk of failure in Iraq. While Obama would seek to sustain and improve international collaboration in Afghanistan while increasing US resource, McCain could have been expected to be more demanding of NATO and other nations to remove caveats and provide resource themselves. Both would need to start from scratch in constructing a new policy for Pakistan, as the seat of power in that troubled nation becomes more evident.

IRAN

52. It is with Iran that we may yet see the greatest differences in approach, with Obama apparently ready to engage in dialogue with Iran in a manner that may yet prove deeply unpopular domestically, given strong US animosity to such an evident enemy. Yet some wider package of security guarantees, economic incentives, energy assistance and diplomatic normalisation, even a non-invasion guarantee, seems the only viable course of action to address the nuclear issue and the wider issue of Iranian malfeasance in US areas of interest across the region. McCain took a stronger line: ‘There is only one thing worse than the United States exercising the military option that is a nuclear-armed Iraq’.

WIDER ISSUES

53. More broadly, both candidates had some fences to mend, not just with NATO but in recovering US standing and credibility across the globe and regaining the moral high ground. McCain’s proposal for a ‘league of democracies’ to meet emerging threats was designed to address this but ran the risk of playing to a dangerous narrative of a clash of cultures. 100 democratic nations that excludes Russia and China could only be seen by both as hostile. Maybe he simply sought a new NATO that actually delivers. With emerging challenges to US dominance from China, India and an energy-rich, resurgent Russia, the need to be ready to meet the next shock or challenge will be ever greater. The resetting and reconstitution of US forces, rebalanced to meet global risk, will be an important and expensive challenge.

CONCLUSIONS

SHORT TERM CAPACITY

54. Faced with continuing commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan that seem likely to endure for several years, on top of existing treaty obligations, the US will avoid any further call on its exhausted ground forces. The planned increase in overall troop numbers will not help; it will be difficult to achieve, slow to deliver and will only serve to alleviate stretch not remove it. Concerns for the health of the force will see further reduction in force numbers in Iraq but this will be offset by increased deployments in Afghanistan. The planned increase in overall troop numbers will not help; it will be difficult to achieve, slow to deliver and will only serve to alleviate stretch not remove it. Concerns for the health of the force will see further reduction in force numbers in Iraq but this will be offset by increased deployments in Afghanistan. Some relief may be gained by developing the US civilian reconstruction capacity to share the burden with military effort, but not soon. In the short-term, the US will be heavily reliant on global strike to deter where it cannot hope to intervene. During this period the US high-end capability will continue to suffer from lack of exercise opportunity and resource priority.

STRATEGY AND THE UTILITY OF COALITIONS

55. As the US emerges from its current commitments it will seek to return to the Powell Doctrine of ‘overwhelming force’, delivered either exclusively by high-end US forces or in limited coalitions of the willing and capable. In subsequent stages of conflict resolution, the US
will seek to burden share with others and will continue to support NATO and other regional organisations that encourage and facilitate this. This should see a tempering of US criticism of NATO in Afghanistan, even while it ‘re-Americanises’ the most demanding areas of the Afghan conflict. Where the US does commit forces for peace keeping and nation building, it will avoid placing its forces under UN or NATO command, and will instead seek to create a defined and internationally endorsed ‘space’ in which it can operate alone or with a few trusted and capable allies, notably the UK and Australia. Pakistan and the FATA will remain the most difficult problem faced by a new Administration, where events may yet shape the outcome.

REBALANCING US FORCES

56. The US will strive to move back to a rebalanced global posture that removes it from static operations. This may see further withdrawal from Europe and the Gulf, replaced with strategies that promote confidence and regional capacity, backed by rapid points of entry for highly capable and overwhelming US force, held over the horizon. At the same time, US defence expenditure will plateau or fall, placing further strain on commitments and impacting on the major equipment programme it requires to sustain high-end military advantage.

US PERCEPTIONS

57. The US’s strong moral certainty will continue to be tempered with instincts for isolationism that wax and wane with perceived national self-confidence and military experience, as has been the case throughout recent history. Today, the US feels bruised and unloved. It is engaged in a domestically unpopular war it cannot escape from with credit any time soon. Near-term intervention will require both important national interest and US values to be at stake. Poor confidence in US intelligence and the narrative of key leaders, as well as perceived poor standing in the eyes of the world, will reinforce isolationism. Neither the US psyche nor the US ‘all-volunteer’ forces are ready or willing to undertake another long-term conflict of the nature we see today. It will take another 9/11 scale event to change this. Nevertheless, the US will remain trapped by its own narrative of simplistic enemies, making it difficult to enter dialogue with Iran or the Taliban, even when this is the most effective (or only) course to avoid conflict. A future President may attempt this but at the domestic risk of appearing weak or immature.
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