# Casting Long Strategic Shadows

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DAN G. COX, JUL 30 2012

America has engaged in many military, diplomatic, and international policy initiatives since the Cold War ended. The United States has intervened militarily to a lesser or greater extent in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, the Philippines, Uganda, and Somalia. As in Uganda, some of these interventions have involved fewer than one hundred special operating forces, while others have involved tens of thousands of U. S. forces, such as those dispatched to occupy and reconstruct Iraq and Afghanistan. Now, pivoting its focus to Asia from the Middle East, the U.S. has undertaken a major policy shift. At the strategic level of military planning, this policy shift is illustrated most comprehensively by the new Air-Sea Battle concept. All of these actions, along with new emphases on human rights and forcefully spreading democracy cast potentially long strategic shadows with unintended consequences which policymakers and pundits have yet to foresee.

G. John Ikenberry warns in his seminal work, *After Victory*, that hegemonic powers which do not exercise strategic restraint often find it increasingly difficult to lead other states and "coalitions of the willing" over time. Yet, the first twenty-three years of the post-Cold War era are marked by the American hyper-power showing little to no restraint in its foreign policy initiatives, with seemingly no comprehension of the ramifications of this aggressive foreign policy shift.

Like it or not, American intervention in Iraq served as the catalyst which created a firestorm of revolution in the Middle East and northern Africa. Whether or not these revolutions will lead to democratic change is still in question. It is true that several regimes, Mubarak's Egyptian government and the government in Tunisia, were already teetering prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but it was Iraq that emboldened and broadened the movement to encompass revolutions in Libya, Syria, and at least some democratic reform in Saudi Arabia.

So why not hail the Bush administration in achieving what it set out to do in Iraq and the Middle East: namely create a spoke for a wheel of democracy to grow around? The reason lies in the unintended strategic implications of such a bold and aggressive democratization foreign policy. First, the United States unintentionally took ownership of all the democratic movements in the Middle East. If one or more of these experiments fails, then it will be simple for western detractors to point to recent western intervention as the cause. Second, since America and her allies face a reasonable chance of being blamed for failed democratic interventions, the U.S. will feel a strong pull to intervene during the democratic revolution and after as the regime attempts to stabilize. Not only can this become a drag on the U.S.'s spent forces—the military has already seen multiple combat tours—but this normative entanglement would be far more precarious than any military alliance John Jay feared. As the academic and policy communities embrace the unproven democratic peace thesis and an increasing emphasis on human rights initiatives, like the Mass Atrocities Response Operations movement, the normative pull to intervention increases. Finally, as was shown in polls in the Middle East following the Libyan uprising, the average Middle Easterner is loathe to give credit to western powers even when the evidence of benevolent intervention in a democratic uprising is incontrovertible. So the reward for successful intervention and democratization is likely to be small.

The intervention in Libya is being hailed by some top U. S. military officials as a blueprint for how U. S. intervention should look in the future. But no attention has been paid to the strategic implications of this alleged successful operation. Admiral Stavridis declared that Nato's "victory" in Libya should be hailed as *the* model for future U. S. intervention. Such a proposition is dangerous for two reasons. First, establishing one model for intervention is

always a precarious proposition as each situation in which U. S. forces intervene is likely to be unique, demanding a specifically tailored rather than canned response. Second, Muammar Gaddafi was not universally reviled by other African leaders. In fact, Nelson Mandela had developed a close relationship with Gadaffi over the years. Further, there are many autocratic regimes in Africa that have surely noticed by now that Chinese attention leads to monetary gain while American attention tends to lead to regime change.

A similar lesson is likely being learned by South Asian states. While the U. S. Special Operating Forces' (SOF) raids in Pakistan, which resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden and other top Al Qaeda officials, were both spectacular and effective in disrupting Al Qaeda's organization, the strategic implications of violating a sovereign ally's territory have not been fully explored. While some imply that Pakistan is now less likely to cooperate with the United States, no one has thought about how India views the situation. One possible outcome is that India will become less enticed by American leadership if they interpret the Pakistani incursion as a signal that the U.S. will violate even an ally's sovereign territory if the interest is compelling enough. Whether the raids had the correct strategic effect or not is less important as is the point that leaders need to recognize that almost any major strategic initiative will create winners and losers. Thus, a proper risk/reward assessment must be conducted before enacting such strategically disruptive policies.

As the focal enemy in the proposed Air-Sea Battle concept, China is more likely than ever not to follow U. S. leadership initiatives. In fact, all of the aforementioned initiatives, combined with the current U. S. policy toward Syria and the previous move to recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state, has driven China and Russia together in an informal policy alliance against the western powers and their democratic and human rights initiatives. Instead of enraging China, the United States should be engaging China. But as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton extolled the virtues of Mongolian democracy recently, China feels even less inclined to engage with the United States. It appears that the democratic peace proponents are in full control of U. S. foreign policy and prudence has been thrown to the wind.

Walter McDougall's famous treatment of U. S. foreign policy history shows us that for the first half of the American Republic's history, policy leaders unilaterally and selectively engaged with the world. As American foreign policy begins to represent the crusader state McDougall fears, surely it is time to reconsider the strategic shadows that the post-Cold War foreign policy initiatives have cast. Even seemingly successful strategic initiatives like the U. S. SOF raid that killed Osama bin Laden created winners *and* losers. All actions a state takes, from the strategic through the operational to the tactical, create winners and losers. It is high time that academics and policy makers consider the full effect of their actions.

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