

The Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and US use of Military Force

Written by Benaisha Daruwalla

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/02/18/what-impact-have-the-wars-in-afghanistan-and-iraq-had-on-the-willingness-to-utilise-military-force-to-advance-us-foreign-policy-objectives/>

BENAISHA DARUWALLA, FEB 18 2012

What Impact Have the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had on the Willingness to Utilise Military Force to Advance US Foreign Policy Objectives?

In an online poll in 2003 Time Magazine asked its readers worldwide to vote on the question “Who really poses the greatest danger to world peace in 2003? Iraq, North Korea or the United States?”[1] North Korea received 7% of the vote and Iraq 8%, meaning that the USA gained the remaining 84%. This shocking result was probably the consequence of Bush’s invasions into Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively. Whilst there are clear limitations to such a poll, it does reveal the unfavourable way in which US military action was received internationally at that time. This, coupled with the fact that these wars have been dragging on for almost a decade now with undetermined success, has led to hard questions regarding the efficacy of using military force to achieve foreign policy objectives.

There is a strong normative argument that America ought to have ‘learnt’ from Afghanistan and Iraq and accordingly should not be so willing to resort to military force to achieve future foreign policy objectives. However the reality is inevitably more complex and the question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Instead the evidence points to a more nuanced argument; that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have diminished America’s willingness to deploy traditional methods of force whilst simultaneously increasing its willingness to utilise new, technologically advanced methods. So in response to the question of whether the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have impacted the United States’ willingness to utilise military force to achieve foreign policy objectives, the answer seems to be no; they have on balance not impacted on America’s willingness to use force, altering only the type of force used by the military.

In order to argue this convincingly we will look at why despite failing to secure success in Afghanistan and Iraq militarily, willingness to utilise force has not declined. The most compelling account of this rests on the role of Eisenhower’s so called ‘military-industrial complex’ and the pervasive effect this has had on American foreign policy, leading to over-reliance on the military to achieve foreign policy objectives. Alongside this we will consider new kinds of military force which are now available and their significance in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is also worth reflecting on the practical impact of the wars and how the significant costs incurred have potentially constrained, at least in the short-term, America’s ability to use military force. To finish, we will discuss US foreign policy challenges more generally and any potential long-term strategic repercussions of Afghanistan and Iraq that may impact on America’s willingness to utilise military force in the future. Through these arguments, it should become apparent that willingness to utilise military force has not been diminished by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it has been changed.

Although the question here does not centre specifically on what US foreign policy objectives are, it will be helpful to begin with this question. The question merits an essay in its own right so discussion will be necessarily brief. At its core American foreign policy is about protecting and promoting the national interest, which again, though a topic in its own right, can be considered for the purposes of this essay very basically under the sub-headings of national security and economic security. Such simplifications are not without controversy however. Contemporary debate tends to centre on whether we can consider the US as a benevolent hegemon or whether their foreign policy objectives are

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based on imperialist aspirations. A distinction can be drawn between those who view America's role globally defined in terms of benign primacy (generally the liberals) or dominance (the neo-conservatives).

Whether or not we see US foreign policy as imperialist or benevolent, it is also necessary to note that the debate does not centre on isolationist versus internationalist tendencies, as perhaps it once did. This fight has already been won by the internationalists: indeed, calls for isolationism cannot really have any credibility today. So, within this internationalist paradigm, the difference lies between the liberals, who favour intervention in the context of multilateral coalitions and have respect for the UN, and the neo-conservatives who seek "a much more active role for the country"[2] and are keen to participate globally regardless of international institutions and coalitions.[3] It is the actions of the neoconservatives, notably G.W. Bush and his essentially unilateral decision to invade Iraq in 2003, that have led commentators to suggest that US foreign policy reflects an ambition for empire, something that the liberals are keen to dismiss. We can see then that even if foreign policy objectives were clear and homogenous, which they undoubtedly are not, the means involved with pursuing these objectives can be varied. It is these means then that we turn our attention to in discussion of the impact that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have had on America's willingness to utilise force to advance foreign policy objectives.

"When you have thousands of cruise missiles and smart bombs and lots of B-2s and F-18s, the world looks like a target set."[4] Through this statement Walt illustrates the underlying militarism that he and other commentators such as Guyatt see as pervasive in the American political system. For them, having "the most powerful and well-equipped military in the world"[5] has meant that American foreign policy has, and will continue to be conducted on the premise that military power can be utilised to solve all foreign policy problems even in light of cases such as Afghanistan and Iraq where using the military has perhaps not been successful.

Guyatt in particular is keen to highlight the role that the so-called 'military-industrial complex' plays in the perpetuation of American militarism. The term, first coined by Eisenhower in 1961, refers to the relationship between the Pentagon and its "crucial ally: the business community"[6] and the way in which they seek to maintain an enormous defence budget for mutual benefit. As evidence of this relationship, Guyatt notes the period at the end of the Cold War when America had the world's strongest military but there was no longer any plausible use for that military. Despite hopes of a peace dividend, the military-industrial complex prevailed and there were no significant defence spending cuts. This post-Cold War situation, recalls Powell, prompted Albright to ask the question "What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?"[7] Powell's unequivocal response was that the military was not to be used solely because it was there.[8] This being the case, we can see that Albright's sentiment supports Walt's reasoning that the US has been and indeed is so willing to utilise military force precisely because of its apparent capabilities. For this reason alone we can suggest that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in common with most other military conflicts involving the USA, are effectively fated to have no impact on America's willingness to utilise military force.

This idea has been taken up by Bacevich in his most recent, tellingly titled book *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*[9] described as a "bracing and intelligent polemic against some 60 years of American militarism." [10] Bacevich seeks to highlight the impact the entrenched military-industrial complex has on American foreign policy, arguing ultimately that the US is doomed to perpetual war. He blames not only what he refers to as an 'unthinking Washington consensus' through which militarism is perpetuated but also the acquiescence of the American public who fail to critique this corrupting practice.[11] Such a prophesy may appear exaggerated until we consider that the current annual defence budget is circa \$700billion[12], an amount "as big as those of the world's next twenty highest military spenders"[13] combined. In a time of a virtually unparalleled fiscal debt, this speaks volumes about the power wielded by the military-industrial complex. As Guyatt sharply puts it; "In many respects, the course of defence spending has demonstrated that the Pentagon's most impressive defensive operations surround its own budget." [14]

Further, Bacevich is not alone in his pronouncements. The idea of a 'Washington consensus' is also alluded to by Walt who suggests that the "US foreign policy establishment"[15] operates within an accepted paradigm whereby the use of military force to achieve foreign policy objectives is not only accepted but also preserved.[16] So "it doesn't really matter which party happens to be occupying Pennsylvania Avenue"[17]; the Pentagon-focused response to

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foreign policy remains in essence, the same.

Such an interpretation seems to tally with evidence from the actions of the Obama administration regarding the Iraq war. Obama stated in 2002 that he was firmly against the Iraq invasion, riding “an anti-war platform into office.”[18] Yet nearly a decade later and in his third year of office, despite these campaign pronouncements the US military continue to be present in Iraq. This seems like solid evidence of the existence of some ‘Washington consensus’ or foreign policy-making paradigm which affects even the most well-intentioned of policy-makers into accepting military force as the primary means to achieve foreign policy objectives. Thus, in spite of Afghanistan and Iraq the “American notion that a military offensive can provide an immediate or lasting solution to a political problem”[19] remains intact, propagating the myth that military primacy equates to omnipotence.[20]

So again we can assert that because of the pervasive military-industrial complex and its accompanying paradigm, any perceived military failure in Afghanistan and Iraq is unlikely to decrease American willingness to use force to achieve future foreign policy objectives. But it is also true that the Afghanistan and Iraq wars have caused a change in the type of force the US is willing to deploy. The trend towards using advanced technological weaponry over traditional methods of force was growing before Bush embarked on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, their prolonged nature has pushed costs, both human and economic, so far that we can suggest a rapid shift in preference for using high-technology types of force. The foundations for this trend were laid by the Vietnam War and the ensuing ‘syndrome’ that consequently affected the US. There is in fact much debate as to the extent and perhaps even the existence of such a ‘syndrome’, although detailed discussion of that is beyond the scope of this essay. Still, what can be said, whether such a syndrome existed or not, is that the unprecedented and humiliating defeat America suffered led to scrutiny over “what possible circumstances would ever justify American wars in foreign lands again”[21] and hence raised difficult questions regarding the use of military force.

An unwillingness to bear the costs of American engagement abroad manifested itself through the Pentagon’s increased obsession with “exit strategy” (how to get out) and “mission creep” (a campaign that stretches to embrace new tasks and lasts longer than mandated)”[22] The concern for “getting caught in a Vietnam War-like quagmire”[23] is argued by Feffer to have defined the next period of foreign policy in which the military engagements the US partook in, notably war with Iraq in 1991, were conducted to ensure the job was done as swiftly as possible and with minimum casualties; indeed, the ground operation in Iraq lasted a mere 100 hours.

Also important to note here is the Kosovo conflict of 1999 because the war against Serbia “became the first military engagement in modern history with no casualties for the victors.”[24] This profoundly altered the way in which war was conceptualised, with the advent of so-called ‘precision weaponry’. Ignatieff termed this “virtual war”[25] which he considered “war with death removed, waged in conditions of impunity.”[26] This reduction, perhaps even removal of risk and the potential for military force to be exerted with minimum casualties has been adopted as a defining feature of Obama’s campaign in Iraq and especially Afghanistan.

The administration has not only continued the war in Afghanistan but actively enlarged it, significantly through the use of high technology weapons. Figures reveal “Obama has sharply escalated drone attacks, launching more than twice as many over the past year [2008-9] as the Bush administration carried out in its last year in office.”[27] Obama’s ‘surges’ in Afghanistan have increasingly been targeted at the complex and dangerous ‘Af-Pak’ region which has seen high levels of US casualties, so becoming “an increasingly unwelcome item on CNN.”[28] It is understandable then that the use of unmanned drones has become favoured in this dangerous area.[29] The same can be seen in Iraq where in 2010, drones carried out over two hundred missile and bomb attacks compared with 2008, when seventy seven missile strikes were launched.[30]

These predator drones cost significantly less than traditional fighter aircraft which means that not only is their usage potentially saving American lives but also saving money. In light of this, as well as the post-Vietnam aversion to prolonged, high-casualty engagement, it is easy to see why Obama has shown such willingness to deploy this method of military force. Accordingly we can see from this perspective also that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have not hampered US willingness to use force. Instead, they have acted as a catalyst for the significant increase in the deployment of high-technology force, changing the nature of warfare, leading to wars “which look nothing like the

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total wars of World War II and Vietnam.”[31]

Inevitably this interpretation has met many challenges, perhaps the most credible coming from the likes of Ikenberry who has highlighted the work that Obama and key players in his administration, such as Clinton and Gates, have done towards restoring and enhancing international engagement. Given that Obama “came into office promising to repair the damage done by his predecessor to America’s global standing”[32] it seems reasonable that people expected a change from Bush’s “muscular, unilateralist foreign policy.”[33] Initially it appeared that this was to be the case as Secretary of State Clinton promised diplomacy would be the “vanguard of foreign policy”[34] for the incoming administration with military force to be used only as a last resort. Clinton further sought to prove that this was not merely State Department rhetoric but a real change by highlighting Defence Secretary Gates’ support for “adding resources to the State Department and elevating the role of the diplomatic corps”[35], a rare call for a Secretary of Defence to make.

There is some evidence of this, for example the re-opening of diplomatic relations with Iran which had been frozen since 1980 or Obama’s Cairo speech in June of 2009. However, such examples are not sufficient for us to argue that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq caused a fundamental shift in Washington regarding willingness to use military force. As the Obama administration continues into its third year, a gap between public diplomacy and actual policy has increasingly been noted by pundits and the public alike. Thus, Seib concludes that it is evident that public diplomacy exists as a “sideshow, clearly outside of the heart of policy making”[36] which we can take to be a reliance on military force.

Still, Ikenberry suggests that Obama has the right international strategy because of his focus on emphasising alliances, partnerships and multilateralism.[37] This has led some to deduce that Obama has broken away from Bush’s strategy because of the problems encountered in Afghanistan and Iraq and the costs associated with their continuance. They cite the increase in bilateral and multilateral meetings, renewed interest in international organisations and agreements such as G20, NATO and the UN as well of course as the Nobel Peace Prize Obama received as a result of such perceived action.

It seems that we can only agree in part with this; yes the Obama administration may have moved away from the unilateral exercise of military force of the Bush years as a consequence of Afghanistan and Iraq. But, we must disagree with the suggestion that this shift towards multilateralism necessarily implies a declined willingness to use force. Instead, we can suggest, as Cameron does, that it is not US reliance on or willingness to utilise military force that has been disturbed by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq but American unilateralism.[38] Cameron’s case is supported by the numerous occasions Obama has made statements clearly pronouncing that “no President should ever hesitate to use force”[39] and that he “will never hesitate to use our [America’s] military swiftly, decisively ...when necessary to defend our...core interests”[40] We can see then that despite the military’s failure to achieve policy objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan, there has been no overall impact on US willingness to utilise military force, even if there has been some tendency towards multilateralism.

Seib’s supposed gap between the rhetoric of diplomacy and multilateralism and overall foreign policy can be seen in the Obama administration’s decision to intervene militarily in Libya. There are three points that need to be raised here in support of the argument that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have not impacted US willingness to use force. Firstly, we can see support for Walt and Bacevich’s ‘Washington Consensus’[41] or some “narrowness of foreign policy debate in Washington.”[42] Whilst appreciating that there may well have been “serious debate inside President Obama’s administration about the wisdom of using military force at all”[43], ultimately, military force was deployed. Walt emphasises that this was advised largely by liberal interventionists such as Hilary Clinton and Susan Rice, highlighting a consensus between “the liberal interventionists of the Democratic party and the neoconservatives that dominate the GOP”[44] on willingness to utilise force to achieve foreign policy objectives in spite of Afghanistan and Iraq. Further, we can see that this deployment is in-keeping with our contention that Afghanistan and Iraq have only impacted the type of force the US is willing to deploy. So, whilst Obama has authorised airstrikes, he emphasised that there would be no ‘boots on the ground’, thus eschewing traditional types of force in favour of sophisticated weaponry to minimise both human and economic costs.

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Finally, much weight has been placed on Obama's engagement with the international community over Libya. Commentators such as Bergen are keen to stress the multilateral nature of the operation, focusing on the UN Security Council Resolution and the involvement of the Arab League.[45] In this way, they hope to show that the impact of Afghanistan and Iraq has been significant on American foreign policy, leading policy makers to re-assess the wisdom of relying on military force to achieve foreign policy objectives. This seems to be the creation of a somewhat false dichotomy between Obama's use of military force within a multilateral framework and Bush's unilateral use of military force. Coalitions aside, the use of military force is just that: the use of military force. To suggest that it is something different when asserted multilaterally seems to be missing the crucial point.

So to sum up; the military intervention in Libya, despite being limited, still proves US willingness to engage military force to advance foreign policy objectives. Hence the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been of little impact. Military force remains, despite the rhetoric of the Obama administration, the primary tool for achieving US foreign policy objectives. As Walt laments; "it took the debacle in Iraq and the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan to remind us [America] of the limits of military power, and it seems to have taken Obama less than two years on the job to forget that lesson." [46]

Hopefully the above arguments are sufficiently persuasive to allow us to claim that despite evidence of increased diplomacy, it cannot be said that Afghanistan and Iraq have decreased US willingness to use military force. However, for those who remain un-persuaded, we will look at a separate, equally compelling argument, namely that the wars have not constrained America's *willingness* to use force but its *capability* to do so. Kegley Jr. and Raymond identify that the military resources of America, whilst vast, are by no means indefinite. The consequences of war in Afghanistan and Iraq are that the "US military's troop strength, equipment and supplies have been stretched thin" [47] in spite of a 48% increase in military spending since 2001 [48] (before Afghanistan and Iraq, defence spending was roughly 3% of US GDP whereas today it stands around 6.2% GDP. [49])

What can be deduced from these figures is that even if the US did want to utilise military force in a more unrestricted and unilateral manner it would not be feasible: the constraints of chronic national debt, which is already pushing the upper bounds of the Debt Ceiling, means that the vast defence budget cannot be sustained. The forming of an international coalition force to intervene in Libya can hence be seen as a necessity for an America that cannot continue to 'go it alone' regardless of its actual willingness to do so. So, when Obama issues statements declaring that "American leadership is essential, but that does not mean acting alone" [50] it is perhaps worth considering whether this stems from some impact the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had on US willingness to use military force to achieve foreign policy objectives, or whether it is down to the practical restraints that exist on deployment of said force.

Here then we have discussed both the theoretical and practical impacts that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have had on American willingness to utilise force. However these wars and their impacts are not the only factors influencing the means used to achieve foreign policy objectives. Our question is somewhat limiting in that it asks us to explain any changes or noticeable trends since 2001 based on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. These wars have dominated discussion of US foreign policy over almost the last decade however, in this time other challenges have also been emerging and evolving. Such challenges have arguably had a more significant impact on America's willingness to utilise military force to achieve foreign policy objectives than the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As argued at the beginning of this essay, we should bear in mind that the focus and reliance on the military to achieve foreign policy objectives is an inherent feature of US foreign policy. Nonetheless, it appears that challenges have emerged that are beginning to confront this paradigm, resulting in a shift away from over-reliance on utilising military force to a more diplomatic, co-operative approach. There has been some realisation of the limited scope military action provides to solve important problems faced in today's world. Nye makes clear that today, military power does not dominate all issues; in fact in the contemporary world "the contexts of power differ greatly on military, economic and transnational issues." [51] These contemporary challenges alluded to range widely from climate change, to energy security to global financial stability. However, they are all united by virtue of being vital to US national interest and also impossible to solve through the use of military force.

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Accepting this line of thought has important implications for the argument that as a consequence of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration shifted the focus from military force to diplomacy. This is because it cannot be proven that the current tendency towards co-operation and engagement has arisen as a consequence of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Undoubtedly, they have played a starring role in US foreign policy over the last decade but the impact they have had should not be over-stated. It is equally plausible and perhaps more likely (bearing in mind the militaristic trend of US foreign policy), that this perceived change is due to the unsuitability of the military for fighting contemporary challenges such as ensuring global financial stability. Indeed, if the pre-eminent challenge of the day continued to be conventional state versus state warfare it is likely, despite Iraq and Afghanistan, that over-reliance on military force would continue. There is a need here to re-iterate an earlier point premised on the fact that diplomacy and force are not mutually exclusive. Subsequently, we should be wary of seeing increasing diplomatic efforts, whether a result of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq or other contemporary challenges, as a sign that there has been a decline in US willingness to use force to achieve foreign policy objectives.

We have mainly focused on the short-term impact that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have had on US willingness to use force, such as the actions of the Obama administration and the potential economic constraints. This can be extended to discuss the long-term implications of the war and the use of force. According to Jervis, Kegley Jr. and Raymond, the wars in Afghanistan and particularly Iraq have squandered America's reputation and standing internationally.[52] This alienation from the international community, Jervis argues, is likely to be a long-term issue which will hinder America's ability to act as the global hegemon; a necessary position for the US if it wants to achieve its foreign policy objectives.[53] Nye suggests that the lost ground can be re-gained through deployment of so-called 'smart power' which highlights the need for "hard coercive power mixed with the soft attractive power of ideas." [54] This appears to be a contemporary formulation of Gramsci's idea of the dual perspective in political action which explains that hegemony can only be exerted and maintained through both coercion and consent. [55] The Obama administration does appear to want to follow Nye's prescription evidenced by the fact that Clinton began utilising the idea of 'smart power' right from her Confirmation Hearing in 2009.[56] Despite these efforts it seems Jervis is correct to hold that this will be a long-term problem though as the decline in what Nye would term America's 'soft power' continues to be felt today. For example; Obama's failed attempt in February this year to persuade Mahmoud Abbas to remove the proposed UN Security Council vote regarding the illegality of new Israeli settlements. It is very telling that America can no longer influence even tiny nations such as Palestine 3 years into the Obama presidency and nearly a decade after the commencement of the Afghanistan war. The indirect yet significant impact of this problem will be that America may find it difficult to gain international support for future foreign policy endeavours. So we could suppose that even if Obama, or his successor, wanted to move away from military responses to foreign policy towards a more diplomatic approach, it may be difficult to do so. The military will therefore remain the preferred means of achieving foreign policy objectives. This suggests something similar to our short-term argument that the impact of the wars will not affect willingness to utilise force.

This is countered by David and Grondin who suggest that the economic implications of Afghanistan and Iraq are severe, long-lasting and will inevitably lead to some "boomerang effect, precipitating the beginning of the end of American might." [57] Such a view is corroborated by Altman and Haass who suggest that the current trajectory of US spending [58] is unsustainable and can lead only to "an age of American austerity." [59] Consequently it is argued that the US will not be able to maintain its armed forces at their current unparalleled level into the future and so will not be able to continue to operate a foreign policy premised on the basis of having the world's most sophisticated armed forces.

The unprecedented level of federal debt will undoubtedly have serious long-term implications for the US but the extent to which the armed forces will be affected is perhaps overstated. This is firstly because the argument is based upon the assumption that the military-industrial complex and its self-perpetuating nature can be overcome, of which there is no evidence at present. Additionally, we should remember that the US spends more on defence than the rest of NATO combined so, even if it were forced to decrease defence spending, it is likely that it will continue to be the world's preeminent military power. Nevertheless, it may still become strategically imperative for the US to begin achieving foreign policy objectives via alternative means if it wishes to remain the leader of the international community.

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So we can conclude that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have not fundamentally impacted US willingness to utilise military force to achieve foreign policy objectives. The case put forwards by Guyatt, Walt and Bacevich – that this is due to the strong military-industrial complex and Pentagon-focused thinking amongst the foreign policy making elite – seems to carry the most validity. This is especially the case now that high-technology weaponry is being increasingly deployed as it is only through extensive research and development that the American military can retain its technological advantage. This may not always be the case though; the emergence of new global security issues has forced America to engage in diplomacy, the need for which, as globalisation continues, is likely only to increase. Alongside the severe debt problem, it appears as that this will provide the impetus for any further change in willingness to utilise military force, not the outcome of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This being said, both wars are ongoing. There are likely to be some unknown indirect effects in the long-term, for example a possible decline in competitive advantage of the US as war expenditure has siphoned resources away from education and infrastructure.[60] Further, when and how these wars will end is as of yet unknown and the course they take from now may alter some of the arguments presented in this essay. But, until such time, it seems that we can conclude that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have not impacted America's willingness to utilise military force to advance foreign policy objectives.

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Written by: Benaisha Daruwalla
Written at: University of Warwick
Written for: United States Foreign Policy
Date written: April 2011