

## Obama administration learns that ‘leading from behind’ is the right place for the U.S.

By Walter Pincus

If Mali is any example, “leading from behind” is the right policy choice for the United States to follow in most of today’s international confrontations with what is now termed “terrorism.”

The Obama administration’s actions in the past months reflect it has learned some hard lessons from the United States’ 11 years fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. The wars have cost the nation 6,300 U.S. lives, 50,300 casualties among American service personnel and about \$1.3 trillion.

What’s one lesson?

“The best-intentioned foreign intervention is bound to bog its armies down in endless wars fighting invisible enemies to help ungrateful locals,” as the Economist magazine frankly wrote in its Jan. 26 issue.

Sound familiar?

How about what then-Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates told West Point cadets almost two years ago: “Any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General [Douglas] MacArthur so delicately put it.”

On Tuesday night, former secretary of state George P. Shultz, in an appearance before the Council on Foreign Relations here in Washington, put it this way: “Iraq and Afghanistan cannot be the template for how we go about” dealing with threats of terrorism.

The Obama refinement to such intervention may be to provide intelligence and logistic support to those deserving such help and capable of receiving it. But the lead for using combat troops, “boots on the ground,” should be taken by those whose vital interests are directly involved — starting with the host government. Next should be neighboring countries. In the best of circumstances, they would be banded together in regional organizations, and, if possible, with authorization from the United Nations.

If the situation requires U.S. diplomacy to facilitate such collaboration and authority, fine. That is where the world’s greatest power should take the lead. If more hawkish Americans want to call this “leading from behind,” then that’s all right, too. Finally, when outside ground forces from a major power are required, it should come from a nation with historic roots in the host country.

France is a good example. It stepped up and took the lead by going into Mali, a former colony, in response to the Bamako government's call for help. Another example is the international cooperation on the oceans off Somalia that has successfully been dealing with the piracy problem.

At Thursday's Senate Armed Services Committee confirmation hearing for former senator Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) to become defense secretary, members are going to ask Hagel about his views on how to confront our numerous threats, including terrorism.

He would do well to echo some of the views Shultz stated Tuesday night.

Shultz said, "We have paid a very heavy price in this country in our response to [terrorism], personally I think much too heavy." He added that what is needed is "a much more precise strategy for dealing with the terrorism that arises mostly from a sometimes violent brand of Islam. . . . It's not going to go away and we have to find a way to deal with it."

Another lesson for the United States from Mali comes into play. Did that threat to the Bamako regime from a collection of groups represent a real danger to the U.S. homeland or its citizens? One group was made up of the nomadic Tuaregs who have been negotiating with and also fighting the central Mali government for decades. Their issues are domestic.

Then there is Ansar Dine, a more radical Islamic Tuareg group that has recently split into two elements. Add to the mix the so-called al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a jihadist militant group that the United States has officially designated as a foreign terrorist organization.

Repeatedly described as an al-Qaeda affiliate, it really is a guerrilla Islamic movement driven from Algeria by that country's secular government in the late 1990s. In the early 2000s, it publicly claimed allegiance to al-Qaeda in a move to aid recruiting and relevance. Since that time, some of its members have been fighting the United States in Iraq. And most recently it's been alleged the group was involved in the Benghazi consulate raid.

But mostly, AQIM and the others are engaging in a long-standing tradition for this largely ungoverned desert area — where hostage-taking and ransoms, smuggling and drug-trafficking have been a way of life.

As the Economist notes, "Some of them, waving the banner of Islam, have seized on legitimate local grievances fueled by poverty, discrimination and the mismanagement of corrupt governments."

The United States needs better intelligence to help separate thugs and gangsters using terrorist tactics from groups that are really global jihadists whose aim is to do harm to the United States and its citizens. That requires human intelligence on the ground. That's a difficult and time-consuming process, made even more complicated for CIA case officers because often unsavory, even criminal agents are needed to penetrate jihadist groups.

Drones are useful for surveillance and even attacking known terrorist units, but it's human intelligence that is required to separate the real terrorist threat from the gangsters or even insurgent elements that have legitimate demands against their governments.

That brings up one cautionary note.

As the United States plans to bring its drones or other types of air surveillance to North Africa, it should take care where it bases U.S. equipment and personnel. As I learned 40 years ago when I ran an investigation into the U.S. military abroad for Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.), then-chairman of the upper chamber's Foreign Relations Committee, the presence of U.S. troops in a foreign country is almost as good as a treaty when it comes to defending the home country's leaders in power.

Both Niger and Burkina Faso, mentioned as possible basing sites for U.S. military surveillance teams, have been listed in the 2011 State Department Report on Human Rights Practices as having security forces that use excessive force against civilians and engage in extrajudicial killings. Like it or not, the United States will be linked as supporting those governments by their citizens.

Even "leading from behind" has its dangers.

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