

Lessons from the Past Twenty Years—A Former National Security Policymaker and Intelligence Community Leader’s Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

For almost all of the two decades since the 9/11 attacks, the United States has been at war – in Afghanistan, in Iraq and Syria, and globally against al Qaeda and ISIS. Although it has had some dramatic successes, the United States entered these conflicts largely unprepared for the challenges it would face and made several strategic and operational errors along the way. There are thus several positive and negative lessons to be learned from our experience. The strategic environment, moreover, has changed dramatically during the past two decades, with the resumption of great power competition with China and Russia, a global financial crisis and a global health crisis, and continued advances in emerging technologies. There are lessons to be learned as well from how well we prepared, or failed to prepare, for these more recent challenges. This essay looks at some of these lessons from a number of vantage points: counterterrorism; counterinsurgency and nation-building; conventional and hybrid warfare campaigns; intelligence and covert action; counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction; armed support for opposition movements; great power competition; national security strategy; and defense planning and investment. It draws extensively on my experience as a national security policymaker and Intelligence Community leader from 2007 to 2015 and is adapted from my forthcoming memoirs, *By All Means Available*, which is scheduled to be published by Alfred A. Knopf in May 2022.

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I. COUNTERTERRORISM, COUNTERINSURGENCY, AND HYBRID WARFARE CAMPAIGNS

For the most part, our counterterrorism operations have been effective since the 9/11 attacks. There have been no 9/11-scale attacks on the U.S. homeland and al Qaeda and ISIS have been substantially degraded and dismantled. We transformed from a reactive, episodic counterterrorism strategy before 9/11, to a far more successful, proactive, continuous counterterrorism strategy after 9/11. Our unconventional campaign in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 overthrew the Taliban regime within two months and eliminated al Qaeda's sanctuary in Afghanistan. Our campaign to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat core al Qaeda in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region has been successful, as have our campaigns against al Qaeda affiliates in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, North Africa, and Syria, though in some cases, they have taken longer. On May 1, 2011, we brought justice to Usama Bin Ladin in his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Between 2014 and 2020, we waged a successful, if too gradual counterterrorism campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. With our global partner network, we have disrupted several terrorist attacks. As a result, America is much safer today than it was before 9/11. There are several lessons, both positive and negative, to learn from America's long war with global jihadist groups.

There are three primary, positive lessons, in my view, from our counterterrorism experience over the past two decades. The first and most important lesson is to allow global jihadist groups no sanctuary. The 9/11 attacks were as much a policy failure as they were an intelligence failure. Whenever global jihadist groups have been allowed sanctuary – in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region between 2003 and 2008, in Yemen between 2002 and 2011 and periodically thereafter, and in Syria between 2011 and 2014, the threat to the U.S. homeland has grown substantially. Before President Bush made the decision to initiate a sustained counterterrorism campaign in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region in August 2008, the threat to the U.S. homeland from al Qaeda had grown substantially, and another 9/11-scale attack, the trans-Atlantic airline plot in 2006, was only disrupted through good intelligence. Sustained counterterrorism pressure on core al Qaeda and its safe haven providers since 2008 has largely eliminated this threat.

Another key lesson from our counterterrorism experience is the need to attain a critical mass of intelligence capabilities for intelligence-driven operations, the need for policies that permit unilateral action when necessary and other policy and strategy innovations, and the need for operations that achieve a high operational tempo and precision mass. Intelligence from a variety of sources – human, communications, and imagery – drove precision counterterrorism operations, whether they were special operations raids against al Qaeda in Iraq, or Predator strikes in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, in Yemen against al Qaeda's affiliate there, or in other theaters. A buildup of intelligence capabilities in the key theaters and the adoption of a “find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate” operational concept enabled nearly continuous counterterrorism campaigns, giving al Qaeda no time to recover. Included in this intelligence buildup was the

dramatic expansion of our Predator fleet, rapid innovation in the fleet's capabilities, and the allocation of a large portion of the fleet to the strategic counterterrorism mission. This was critical to success in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and in Yemen. Also critical to our intelligence buildup in Iraq was NSA's development of its "Real Time Regional Gateway," which dramatically improved the SIGINT system's operational responsiveness. For operations in areas outside of combat zones, precise intelligence was absolutely critical to attaining the "near certainty" required in terms of correct target identification and assurance of zero non-combatant casualties. The intelligence and special operations capabilities we built up over decades were likewise instrumental in the success of our raids against Usama Bin Ladin, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and other al Qaeda and ISIS leaders.

In August 2008, President Bush approved a shift to unilateral operations with concurrent notification to the Pakistanis. He also approved the inclusion of what came to be called "signature" strikes and a significant expansion of our target list in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Operational tempo went up dramatically, as did the number of al Qaeda and other high value targets who were taken off the battlefield. When we brought bombers, which combined precision with mass due to their precision-guided munitions capabilities and large payload, into the fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001, we quickly broke the back of our adversaries. When we did the same with our Predator campaign in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region between 2008 and 2012, we enjoyed similar success. When we failed to achieve sufficient operational tempo and intensity in our counterterrorism air operations, we were far less successful.

A final lesson is the need for hardened defenses and a network of global counterterrorism partners. A number of aviation security initiatives after 9/11, ranging from hardening and locking aircraft cockpit doors, to no-fly lists and terrorist data bases also played an important role in preventing another 9/11-scale attack. Similarly, the network of global counterterrorism partners we built after 9/11 also allowed us to share intelligence and disrupt multiple plots in the planning stages. Working with our international partners – African Union forces in Somalia and the French in Mali, for example – also enabled us to play a supporting and economy of force role in secondary theaters.

On the negative side of the ledger, there are also two important lessons to consider. The first is to remain focused on our counterterrorism objectives while not becoming too narrowly focused on them. A counterterrorism strategy to remake the Middle East through democratic regime change beginning in Iraq was both unnecessary and infeasible. Regime change in Iraq added to our counterterrorism problem rather than subtract from it. Similarly, conflating counterinsurgency and nation building with counterterrorism strategy, as we did in Iraq and Afghanistan, depleted American power rather than increased it. In Yemen, we had the opposite problem: we were too narrowly focused on our counterterrorism objectives against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. By not doing enough to assist the Hadi regime in the face of the Houthi threat, we lost a key counterterrorism partner.

The second is not to overreact in the heat of the moment. We took some actions after 9/11 – large-scale, warrantless, collection of domestic telephone meta data and “enhanced” interrogation techniques and secret detention of al Qaeda leaders and operatives that we would later come to regret. To be sure, some valuable intelligence was collected from these programs and the rationale for them had a certain logic, but when they were revealed, we regretted having gone down these paths and quickly changed course. A key lesson is not to undertake actions clandestinely or covertly that would be inconsistent with American values or law if done overtly.

On the counterinsurgency side, a key lesson is that operational success does not necessarily lead to strategic success. We succeeded in defeating the Iraqi insurgency and sectarian conflict for a while, only to have it resume after we withdrew. Similarly, we could easily overthrow the Taliban regime, but could not defeat the Taliban insurgency, largely but not exclusively due to the Pakistan sanctuary the Taliban enjoyed. We could certainly prevent the Taliban from winning, but could not end the war before our political leaders and the American people grew tired of it and questioned its wisdom and cost. A key lesson here is that a small footprint, “indirect” approach, like we pursued in Colombia, may be more successful over the long run than the large-footprint, direct approaches we pursued in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On the positive side, we did have substantial operational success in tribal engagement efforts in both Iraq and Afghanistan (with the Anbar Awakening in the former and with the Afghan Local Police program in the latter). We also had considerable success in our special operations raid campaigns, but it was not enough to make up for errors at the strategic level.

If we did too much in Iraq and Afghanistan, we did too little in Ukraine in failing to provide sufficient lethal assistance, intelligence support, and training and advice to Ukrainian forces to impose a high enough cost on the Russians. On the offensive side of hybrid warfare, we were far more effective in Afghanistan in 2001 than we were in Libya in 2011 and in our war with ISIS between 2014 and 2020. We employed our airpower far less intensively in the latter two cases and were more restrictive in the assistance we provided to our irregular ground force partners. As a result, the wars were more protracted, particularly in the counter ISIS case.

II. INTELLIGENCE, COUNTERPROLIFERATION, AND SUPPORT FOR ARMED OPPOSITION MOVEMENTS

Intelligence is our nation’s first line of defense, and it generally performed well over the past two decades. There were a number of intelligence failures, to be sure, ranging from 9/11 and Iraq WMD, to the Arab Spring, the damage done by Edward Snowden and other unauthorized disclosures of intelligence information and capabilities, and Russian covert interference in the U.S. 2016 presidential election. A key lesson from the past two decades is a similar one from the Cold War: intelligence is our first line of defense, and we should prioritize it accordingly. When we fail to do so, as we did during the 1990s, we pay a price.

We had some success in counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Iran, but much less so in North Korea. In Iran, our counterproliferation efforts bought time for diplomacy to succeed. A key lesson in counterproliferation, however, is not to make perfect the enemy of good, as we did with respect to Iran when the Trump administration pulled out of the JCPOA. A second lesson is the difficulty in achieving our counterproliferation objectives when a state is bent on acquiring WMD, as the North Korea case repeatedly has shown.

We supported the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime, but belatedly and half-heartedly. As a result, we weren't successful, even though we had been against a much more difficult, formidable adversary in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Successful support to armed opposition movements requires popular support for the opposition, a coalition of external sponsors, insurgent access to an adjacent sanctuary, early intervention by outside powers, persistence, and sufficient scale of support and sources of asymmetric advantage that can be decisively leveraged. All of these were sufficiently present in Syria, just as they were in Afghanistan during the 1980s, but we failed to exploit them. In failing to do so, we missed a strategic opportunity to deal a blow not only to the Assad regime, but to its Iranian and Russian backers as well. If we back armed opposition movements in the decades ahead, we should remember the contrasting lessons of Afghanistan and Syria.

III. RESPONDING TO THE RESUMPTION OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION

I argue that great power competition clearly had resumed by 2007, with China's destructive ASAT test and Putin's hostile, anti-West speech at the Munich Security Conference. Competition intensified with Russia's attacks on Estonia in 2007 and the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and accelerated further with Xi's accession to power and Putin's return to power in 2012.

Unfortunately, the United States was late in responding to these growing challenges. For too long, U.S. policymakers across administrations believed that our engagement with China could prevent great power competition from intensifying and that Russia no longer posed a threat to U.S. interests. The United States responded ineffectually to Russia's covert and overt invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 and to Russia's covert intervention in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. It has done little since to deter Russian aggression.

On the China side, the United States has insufficiently adapted its force structure to the many challenges China poses with its "anti-access, area denial" capabilities, its rapidly expanding space and cyber capabilities, its development of hypersonic weapons, and its growing use of its economic might for coercive purposes and international influence. As a result, the U.S. ability to project power in the Western Pacific has eroded substantially over the past two decades. The U.S. military has been adapting its force posture slowly to the growing challenges posed by China and Russia, but needs to accelerate these efforts significantly.

On the economic side, we have taken steps to begin the realignment of supply chains away from over-dependence on China, better protection of our intellectual property, and increased investment in key emerging technologies, ranging from autonomy and artificial intelligence, to quantum computing. Much more needs to be done, however. We are now engaged in an economic and technological competition with China for global leadership and in a covert information influence competition with both Russia and China aimed at the political unity and will of the United States and its allies. There are some signs that we recognize these new international realities and are starting to do something about them. Let's hope so.

The Covid-19 crisis also sent us a warning about the fragility of our economy and the need to broaden our conception of national security. An interconnected world and continued revolutionary advances in biotechnology pose challenges as well as great opportunities. The emergence of identity politics, increased political polarization, political gridlock, and the violent assault on our Capitol on January 6, 2021, moreover, have sent another shot across our national bow. Perhaps the most important lesson of the past two decades is that national security begins at home.

For more lessons applicable to the new era of great power competition with China and Russia, however, we will have to look back further in history to our competition with the Soviet Empire during the Cold War. In contrast with our delay in responding to the advent of great power competition in recent years, we responded immediately and effectively during the first years of the Cold War. Having gotten off to a slow start, we now need to get on with it, as this decade will likely be critical to the outcome of the competition.

Four other lessons from our long struggle with the Soviet Empire seem particularly applicable to our new era of great power competition. The first is the need for broad, bipartisan and popular support for our grand strategy. We had that with our strategies of containment, though some were far more successful than others. Each administration, with the possible exception of Johnson's, made important contributions to Cold War strategy, from Truman's containment, Eisenhower's buildup of power at home, and Kennedy's crisis management, to Nixon's opening to China, Ford's and particularly Carter's emphasis on human rights, Carter's second offset strategy, and Reagan's defense and intelligence build up, covert wars in the Third World, and skillful diplomacy with Gorbachev. Sustaining popular support for grand strategy is the sine qua non for a democracy in great power competition. We almost lost it in the late 1960s and 1970s, but recovered after Vietnam, Watergate, and our intelligence scandals. Similar strategic resilience will be required going forward.

The second lesson is to posture ourselves for long-term economic and technological competition. The Eisenhower administration proved very successful at this, putting the nation on a path to fiscal sustainability and setting the conditions to win the technological competition by creating the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and, more importantly, by prioritizing government funding for leading-edge research and development – investing a much larger share of GDP

than we do today. It also postured us to win the space race by creating NASA and the National Reconnaissance Office, and by investment in space capabilities. It grew human capital by encouraging and providing incentives for a great expansion in STEM education, and its creation of the interstate highway system should be a model for the creation of a nation-wide broadband network today.

A third lesson from the Cold War is to seek opportunities to attack our adversary's strategy and to capitalize on our adversary's mistakes. An example of the former is our development of the so-called "second offset" strategy during the late 1970s, when we developed and deployed a range of deep strike capabilities, ranging from intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems that could see deep into the enemy's rear, to long-range, precision, surface-to-surface missiles that could rapidly strike his follow-on forces, and stealth aircraft that could penetrate his air defenses. This reduced U.S. early reliance on tactical nuclear weapons, the "first offset" strategy, which had been in place since the 1950s, and rendered obsolete Soviet conventional strategy in Europe. It paved the way for the Soviet military's support for Gorbachev's attempts to revitalize the Soviet economy, and in so doing, paved the way for the Soviet Empire's destruction. The best example of capitalizing on our adversary's mistakes is our unprecedented covert support for the Afghan resistance that enabled the Mujahedin to drive Soviet forces out of Afghanistan – the first defeat the Red Army had ever suffered in its history – damaging the Red Army's credibility and claim on resources, and making a major contribution to ending the Cold War and, along with it, the Soviet Empire.

A final lesson from the Cold War is the need to keep our allies while seeking to detach allies from our adversary's camp. We did this very successfully on both counts during the Cold War, most notably in the latter case with Nixon's opening to China. Today, we face challenges in countering China's expanding global influence that is a byproduct of its growing economic might, and from Russian subversion aimed at weakening us and our allies, but the principles are the same. Just as in the Cold War, we will need to keep the great industrial and technological powers like Japan and Western Europe on our side and fully engaged in the competition, while adding emerging economic and technological powers like India. Leveraging democracies, albeit in new ways, in the democracy-autocracy competition we once again find ourselves in will be just as important going forward as it was in the Cold War.
