

THE REAL REBALANCING: AMERICAN DIPLOMACY AND THE TRAGEDY OF PRESIDENT OBAMA'S FOREIGN POLICY

John R. Deni

Since coming into office in January 2009, President Barack Obama has sought to rebalance the three-legged stool—consisting of defense, diplomacy, and development—that comprises the American national security policy. In the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate Barack Obama pledged to correct it through such measures as expanding the State Department's Foreign Service. Once in office, the Obama administration expressed its intent to rebalance away from defense and toward diplomacy and development through a variety of strategies as well as policy statements. Most recently, the 2015 National Security Strategy explicitly notes that military force is not the sole means of achieving U.S. national security objectives, arguing that diplomacy is the first line of defense.

In addition to strategies and policy pronouncements, the Obama administration has repeatedly emphasized diplomacy and development in policy implementation over, or instead of, large-scale military measures. From maintaining drawdown timelines in Iraq and Afghanistan, to “leading from behind” in Libya, to relying on sanctions to pressure Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine, the Obama administration has sought to rely less on overwhelming American military power to accomplish foreign policy objectives.

However, the administration generally has been unsuccessful in demilitarizing U.S. foreign policy, as seen in three separate contexts. First, available fiscal data show the continuing dominance of defense spending relative to international affairs spending. Even under sequestration scenarios, although risk may increase with a reduced defense budget, that budget will continue to dwarf the amount of money

spent on diplomacy and development. Second, the authorities granted to the Department of Defense (DoD) to engage in activities previously within the purview of the State Department—particularly in security cooperation—continue to grow. Despite congressional concerns about the risks of granting DoD increased authority in this area, Congress continues to do just that.

Finally, based on several examples over the last 2 decades or more, many experts, practitioners, and observers have concluded that the civilian instruments of American foreign policy—in particular the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, but also other civilian agencies—simply lack the capacity and capability to handle the complex, large-scale challenges facing U.S. national security. In particular, the challenge of failed or failing states has laid bare the shortcomings in the American ability to implement so-called “whole of government” solutions. As a result, DoD continues to be the problem solving agency of choice for legislators as well as those in the executive branch.

The implications of a continued militarization of American foreign policy are significant, most consequentially for the U.S. military. Despite political intent and rhetoric, DoD is very likely to be relied upon again and again to achieve national security objectives, both within and outside its particular areas of competence. As such, it should take some preparatory steps. First, the military services should make a more holistic, institutional commitment to embrace security cooperation as a core mission. There is some evidence that this is underway, but there is much room for improvement, especially in terms of doctrine, acqui-

sition, and personnel policies. Second, the military needs to improve its ability to assess whether and where security cooperation tools are likely to be successful. All too often, the U.S. military becomes a captive of its “can-do” attitude, despite what seem like obvious and insurmountable challenges in hindsight. Finally, if the best military advice is ignored by senior policymakers on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, DoD needs to recognize and prepare for “muddling through” missions it may only have a small chance of achieving.

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