

Strategy, Grand Strategy, and the Enduring War on Terror

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Strategy, in national security as in other fields, consists of using the available means to accomplish some important end. *Grand strategy* requires, among other things, incorporating a nation's various strategies into a coherent—and solvent—whole. There can be, then, an inherent tension between the demands of successful strategy and those of sustainable grand strategy, for the requirements of maintaining solvency across the range of national programs may limit the amount of resources made available to accomplish some particular objective or meet some pressing threat. This is precisely the challenge the United States faces today in dealing with the problem of jihadist terrorism: the demands of strategy and the demands of grand strategy are becoming progressively harder to reconcile.

The United States has now been fighting a global war on terror (GWOT) for nearly two decades, but the threat posed by extremist groups—particularly those capable of creating geographic safe havens and mounting significant external attacks—remains. The confrontation with al-Qaeda's "core" after 9/11 led to a struggle against the al-Qaeda "affiliates" in Iraq and elsewhere. That struggle continues, even as the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (often referred to as ISIS) has taken pride of place in American counterterrorism strategy since 2014. No sooner has the United States suppressed or even defeated one terrorist organization, it often seems, than a new and dangerous successor or group of successors takes its place. This pattern seems likely to endure for the foreseeable future. The Islamic State is now on the cusp of military defeat in Iraq and Syria. Its self-proclaimed "caliphate" lies in ruins.¹ But the conditions that gave rise to it and other extremist groups persist in much of the greater Middle East, and so it is only a matter of time before a new organization—or some reincarnation of an old one—emerges to pick up the jihadist banner. Counterterrorism will therefore continue to place heavy demands on US policy, particularly in the military sphere. There will not be any near-term end to the war on terror.

The analysis in this paper draws on, but also significantly expands upon, the analysis in an earlier assessment. See Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, "Trump and Terrorism: U.S. Strategy after ISIS," *Foreign Affairs* 96, 2 (March/April 2017), 28–36. Whereas the earlier paper was coauthored, the present paper is an individual product.



In the coming years, moreover, the United States will face a serious and growing challenge in conducting that struggle—a challenge even beyond the inherent difficulties of counterterrorism. In the years immediately following 9/11, the United States had a veritable surfeit of means with which to wage the struggle against al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations of international reach. American economic and military primacy were unchallenged; great-power relations were placid; traditional security threats were widely thought to be relics of a bygone era. The United States thus had enormous latitude in prioritizing and resourcing the war on terror, as shown by the massive military, economic, and diplomatic investments the country made in that conflict over the subsequent decade.

Now all this has changed. The threat from jihadist groups endures, but the broader global conditions in which the United States must confront those groups have become far more ominous. The American economic and military lead over its competitors has been reduced. Pressing geopolitical challenges—from great-power competition to rogue states on steroids—compete for attention and resources. A rich man's strategy for fighting the jihadist groups and the conditions that produce them may no longer be possible from an economic or geopolitical perspective, even if it is desirable in its own right.² In short, the tightening constraints on American grand strategy are narrowing the range of options available for US strategy in the war on terror. What is needed, then, is a military strategy that manages a dangerous threat at a reasonable price—that aggressively attacks and pressures the most menacing jihadist groups but keeps that threat within proper grand strategic perspective.

This essay proposes such an approach—what might be termed a medium-footprint military strategy for the war on terror. First, it reviews the persistent nature of that struggle and the increasing global challenges that complicate America's approach thereto. Second, it examines the principal strategic options from which the United States might choose and explains why the alternatives to a medium-footprint approach are likely to fail strategically or prove prohibitively expensive from a grand strategic perspective—or both. Third, it outlines the medium-footprint approach recommended here and discusses its strengths and inherent limitations. Those limitations are numerous. Not the least of them is that the medium-footprint approach consigns the United States to something like an indefinite war on terror. But that strategy, nonetheless, represents the best option for dealing with the threat of jihadist terrorism, while paying due regard to the broader grand strategic challenges America confronts today.

One point of clarification is worth mentioning at the outset. This paper focuses explicitly on the military and political-military dimensions of American strategy and does not offer a comprehensive national approach to counterterrorism. It does so

for several reasons: because the military dimension of counterterrorism is critically important in its own right; because the trade-offs discussed in this paper are arguably sharpest in the military realm; because there are major debates surrounding other dimensions of counterterrorism (domestic surveillance, for instance) that cannot be adequately addressed here; and because the policies the United States pursues in other aspects of the counterterrorism struggle—intelligence and diplomatic cooperation with friendly countries, homeland security measures, and others—are not necessarily contingent on which military strategy it chooses. Nonetheless, it bears restating that military strategy is but one crucial piece of the counterterrorism puzzle. Any effective national approach must incorporate numerous other pieces, as well.

No End in Sight

The war on terror that the United States undertook after the attacks of September 11, 2001, was never supposed to be quick or easy. From the outset, the Bush administration warned that the struggle against al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups of global reach might begin in Afghanistan, but it would not end there. “This war will not be like the war against Iraq a decade ago, with a decisive liberation of territory and a swift conclusion,” President Bush announced on September 20, 2001. “Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen.”³ Well into the second term of his presidency, Bush continued to make the same argument, telling a joint session of Congress that “the war on terror we fight today is a generational struggle that will continue long after you and I have turned our duties over to others.”⁴ Within the administration (and among some outside observers), the favored historical analogy was not World War II but the Cold War, a twilight struggle that ultimately lasted decades.⁵ And indeed, the war on terror has proven remarkably persistent in the years since 9/11. It has not ended, but has simply taken on different forms and different overlapping stages over time.

The first stage of the conflict came with the US campaign to defeat the core al-Qaeda organization that conducted the 9/11 attacks, a campaign that began in Afghanistan in late 2001 and culminated nearly a decade later with the killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. In the second stage, which overlapped with the first, the United States was confronted with the threat from al-Qaeda’s affiliate organizations—namely, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which emerged following the American invasion of that country, as well as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and other groups. By 2008–09, the United States had inflicted severe and nearly mortal blows on the most dangerous of these affiliates, AQI. Yet this stage of the conflict was soon followed by a third, involving the rise of the Islamic State—perhaps the most fearsome terrorist organization the United States has faced to date—and the subsequent multilateral military campaign to defeat that organization.⁶



The basic strategic pattern of the war on terror is thus somewhat depressing, even though it is certainly cause for gratitude that the United States has so far escaped subsequent attacks of similar scale to the initial 9/11 assault. The United States has become extraordinarily proficient at the operational aspects of counterterrorism, in large part because of the immense investments it has made in capabilities such as special operations forces (SOF), unmanned aerial vehicles (drones), intelligence-gathering tools, and financial sanctions. Even America's much-ridiculed homeland security measures have undoubtedly made the United States a harder target.⁷ Yet there remains a certain "whack-a-mole" quality to the war on terror. The United States has not achieved strategic victory—it has not achieved the lasting defeat of the threat from jihadist terrorism—and it often seems that military success against a particular group or movement is promptly followed by the emergence of a new and dangerous incarnation of the challenge.

There is no single reason why this has been the case. Terrorist groups have proven to be learning organizations. They have gained insights from their own travails and those of their predecessors and have adapted accordingly. Policy errors on the part of the United States—under more than one presidential administration—have also helped prolong the struggle. One could point, for instance, to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which gave a jihadist movement that had been battered by US operations in Afghanistan a new lease on life; the bipartisan failure to develop an effective strategy for dealing with Pakistani support for jihadist groups, which allowed al-Qaeda to reconstitute in the tribal regions of that country after its defeat in Afghanistan; the premature withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which allowed a nearly destroyed AQI to reemerge in even deadlier form; and the US intervention in Libya that same year, which removed a regime that had been a fairly helpful—if thoroughly loathsome—counterterrorism partner and replaced it with a lawless vacuum that proved to be a magnet for jihadist groups.⁸ The United States hardly has a spotless record in the war on terror: there have been sins of both omission and commission.

But those failures have also been influenced by the inescapable difficulty of dealing with a threat that is so deeply rooted in conditions that prevail in the greater Middle East. Although research on what causes terrorism has yet to generate a definitive consensus, it seems clear that issues such as political authoritarianism, lack of economic opportunity, and the presence of large groups of unmarried and otherwise unsatisfied young men create fertile ground for ideological radicalism. Political instability and the lack of effective state capacity, meanwhile, create plentiful opportunities for jihadist groups to operate.⁹ (Some regimes even foster jihadist extremism to suit their own political and geopolitical ends.) Given that these conditions have persisted, albeit in varying forms and at varying levels of severity, in much of the region over the past two decades, it is hardly surprising that the danger of jihadist radicalism has persisted as well.

This being the case, it seems unlikely that the end of the Islamic State will lead to the end of the broader war on terror. Some of its provinces will remain intact in countries such as Nigeria and Afghanistan. Remnants of the core in Iraq and Syria may simply go underground and look for new opportunities to renew the struggle.¹⁰ Many al-Qaeda affiliates will remain in business, as well. More broadly, so long as the greater Middle East remains a wellspring of ideological radicalism and violence, it seems likely that new organizations will arise as existing ones are defeated. As then director of national intelligence James Clapper observed in 2016, “The fundamental issues they have—the large population bulge of disaffected young males, ungoverned spaces, economic challenges and the availability of weapons—won’t go away for a long time.” The United States will therefore remain, Clapper said, “in a perpetual state of suppression for a long time.”¹¹

In particular, the United States will face the challenge of dealing with the most dangerous types of jihadist organizations: those that combine geographical safe havens with the intent and capability to mount significant external attacks. Some observers remain skeptical that terrorist safe havens pose a pressing threat to the United States.¹² But the history of the past two decades has repeatedly shown that the combination of global ambition and territorial refuge can be lethal indeed. It was the Islamic State’s ability to carve out a vast geographical safe haven in Iraq and Syria in 2013–14 that allowed it to proclaim the caliphate, rally tens of thousands of followers to the fight, and create the logistical base from which to launch or simply inspire numerous attacks throughout the Middle East, Europe, and beyond. And it was al-Qaeda’s ability to train, plan, and operate largely uninhibited in Afghanistan prior to 9/11 that made bin Laden’s organization so deadly.¹³ Not all terrorist organizations are equally dangerous, of course, and the level of US effort required to suppress them will vary. But the severest manifestations of the jihadist threat remain quite perilous and the United States will need a strategy that reflects the imperative of responding aggressively.

Grand Strategic Constraints

The trouble, however, is that the grand strategic conditions within which that strategy must be prosecuted have become far more challenging. At the outset of the war on terror, the United States possessed essentially uncontested international primacy, in the form of massive economic and military leads over its closest competitors and potential competitors. A decade earlier, at the end of the superpower struggle, many leading observers had assumed that America’s post-Cold War primacy would quickly give way to renewed multipolarity. By the turn of the millennium, however, American predominance had actually become more pronounced. In the early 2000s, for instance, US military outlays accounted for nearly half of overall global military spending and equaled the outlays of roughly the next fifteen countries combined. The American economy was well over twice the size of the nearest national competitor: a US ally,



Japan. “If today’s American primacy does not constitute unipolarity,” wrote two leading political scientists, “then nothing ever will.”¹⁴

The geopolitical environment seemed relatively benign in other crucial respects, as well. Key regions such as Europe and most of East Asia were comparatively secure. Great-power tensions—although not entirely absent—were arguably lower than at any time since the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century. The initial effect of 9/11 seemed likely, at least to some American officials, to reinforce this atmosphere of great-power comity. “Today, the international community has the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war,” the Bush administration argued in its 2002 National Security Strategy. “Today, the world’s great powers find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos.”¹⁵

This extraordinarily favorable grand strategic situation shaped America’s approach to the war on terror in the years immediately following 9/11. Principally, it allowed the United States to devote vast amounts of governmental attention and resources to that struggle. As Bush said, “We will spend whatever is necessary to win the war.”¹⁶ And although there were always well-recognized opportunity costs to this intensive focus on counterterrorism, this situation allowed the United States—for better or worse—to emphasize that issue without worrying that doing so would create near-term vulnerabilities in dealing with other threats.¹⁷ The United States had a great deal of what political scientists call “geopolitical slack” during the early 2000s. Had it possessed a less favorable position—had it confronted severe security challenges from great-power rivals or had it enjoyed a lesser degree of geopolitical primacy—America would have been harder pressed to undertake prolonged, large-scale troop deployments and other heavy investments in Iraq and Afghanistan in the decade after 9/11.

Today, however, the situation is very different. The United States is still by far the most powerful actor in the world, but the degree of primacy it wields—as measured by its share of global GDP or the amount of military power it possesses relative to competitors in East Asia or Eastern Europe—has decreased. Chinese and Russian military buildups have narrowed America’s overall military lead and—particularly—the military primacy Washington previously enjoyed within key regions on the Eurasian periphery. China’s economic rise and the aftereffects of the 2008 financial crisis have created a world in which America’s economic advantage is also somewhat diminished. As Eric Edelman argued as early as 2010, the essentially uncontested primacy of the post-1991 period has given way to the more intensely contested primacy of the present moment.¹⁸

Security threats, meanwhile, have become more numerous and more pressing. The United States faces renewed and intense great-power competition from Russia in

Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere, and from China all along its East and Southeast Asian peripheries. The world's rogue actors—states such as Iran and North Korea—possess increasingly advanced military capabilities and other tools of disruption. They are better positioned to upset the international system than at any time since Saddam Hussein's defeat in the Persian Gulf War in 1991. In every strategic theater of Eurasia—Europe, the Middle East, East Asia—there is pronounced instability, violence, or both. The threat of terrorism has not markedly decreased, but the saliency and immediacy of other challenges have markedly increased.¹⁹

The grand strategic context has become more difficult in other ways, as well. The era of spending whatever it takes on national security has clearly been over for several years now, as US military outlays (constant-dollar) fell from \$759 billion in 2010 to \$596 billion in 2015. All of the military services are at or near their post-World War II lows in terms of end-strength.²⁰ Whether and how significantly this trend will be reversed under the Trump administration remains unclear. There is also a degree of public disillusionment with intensive overseas engagement, even if arguments that the United States is retreating into isolationism overstate the case. In 2013, 52 percent of Americans believed that the United States should tend to its own affairs and let other countries get along as best they can; four years later, 57 percent of Americans—the highest percentage in decades—agreed with a similar statement.²¹ Nation-building missions of the type undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan are in disrepute; the current president of the United States has essentially sworn off such missions, even as he has promised to intensify the campaign against terrorist groups.²²

The basic quandary the United States confronts is that the demand for an effective and robust counterterrorism strategy is as high as ever, but the grand strategic constraints and the competing claims on American attention and resources have become far more severe. So how should American policy makers proceed?

The Disengagement Fallacy

Perhaps the answer is that America does not need a military counterterrorism strategy at all. There is a body of largely academic opinion that holds that American military intervention in the greater Middle East is actually the *cause* of jihadist terrorism, because it radicalizes the populations it affects and gives jihadist groups a scapegoat for their inability to seize power.²³ One approach to the war on terror would thus be essentially to give up the fight: cease US counterterrorism and military operations in the region, withdraw the US troops stationed there, and hope that doing so will ameliorate the threat.

This approach would have the obvious benefit of ensuring that military intervention in the greater Middle East would no longer be a drain on American military and



economic resources, as was undoubtedly the case at the time of peak US commitment in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet this approach is unworkable in practice, because it is based on a fundamentally flawed premise.

The claim that ceasing American military intervention in the greater Middle East would dramatically reduce the threat is misleading, because other issues—from US liberal values and diplomatic relationships with authoritarian regimes in the region to a variety of demographic problems and sociopolitical pathologies within the Muslim world—clearly contribute to that threat, as well. In fact, as jihadist spokespersons have made clear, the price they would demand for a cease-fire would be not simply a halt to US military operations against terrorist groups, nor even a full-on US military retrenchment from the greater Middle East. It would be a wholesale American withdrawal—military, political, economic, intelligence, even cultural—from the region. As al-Qaeda spokesman Adam Gadahn demanded in 2010:

First, you must pull every last one of your soldiers, spies, security advisors, trainers, attaches, contractors, robots, drones, and all other American personnel, ships, and aircraft out of every Muslim land from Afghanistan to Zanzibar.

Second, you must end all support—both moral and material—to Israel and bar your citizens from traveling to Occupied Palestine or settling there, and you must impose a blanket ban on American trade with the Zionist regime and investment in it.

Third, you must stop all support and aid—be it military, political, or economic, or otherwise—to the hated regimes of the Muslim world. This includes the so-called “development aid” . . .

Fourth, you must cease all interference in the religion, society, politics, economy, and government of the Islamic world.

Fifth, you must also put an end to all forms of American and American-sponsored interference in the educational curricula and information media of the Muslim world.

And sixth, you must free all Muslim captives from your prisons, detention facilities, and concentration camps, regardless of whether they have been recipients of what you call a “fair” trial or not.

“Your refusal to release our prisoners or your failure to meet any of our other legitimate demands,” Gadahn concluded, “will mean the continuation of our just struggle against your tyranny.”²⁴

There is little indication that jihadist demands have changed since then. Unless the United States were willing to essentially write off the Middle East as an area of geopolitical interest—and impose severe restrictions on its private citizens’ ability to interact with the peoples and countries of that area—it would thus remain a target of jihadist groups. Ceasing military operations against jihadist groups, then, would probably not ameliorate the threat, but exacerbate it by giving such organizations greater freedom to plan and operate.²⁵

The Wrong Strategies

If one accepts that some degree of US military intervention is needed to combat a persistent threat, then there are three basic strategic options available. At one extreme, the United States could adopt a light-footprint approach similar to the one that characterized American policy from roughly mid-2011 (when Osama bin Laden was killed) until mid-2014 (when the Islamic State conquered Mosul, along with large swaths of Iraq and Syria, and compelled the shift to a more aggressive counterterrorism strategy).²⁶ Under this approach, the United States would accept that what President Obama called “lethal, targeted action” is necessary to disrupt jihadist plotting and organizations and to prevent the most dangerous groups from consolidating control of territory from which they can operate unmolested.²⁷ Accordingly, American forces would administer a steady regimen of military strikes—mainly via drones or other standoff platforms—against the most dangerous extremist groups. The United States would also provide enabling support to friendly partner forces (such as the Iraqi government or United Arab Emirates troops battling AQAP in Yemen), in the form of advisory capabilities, intelligence and logistical assistance, and other assets.

Yet this approach would not entail putting any appreciable number of US combat boots on the ground, nor would it include the sort of resource-intensive nation-building undertaken in the years following 9/11. The logic, as Obama explained it, would be to develop a targeted strategy “that matches this diffuse threat—one that expands our reach without sending forces that stretch our military too thin, or stir up local resentments.”²⁸ Indeed, the light-footprint approach is essentially a limited-liability strategy, one that recognizes the severity of the threat but seeks to treat its worst symptoms primarily through measures that do not expose the United States to significant costs, whether human, financial, or otherwise.

As Obama’s comment indicates, this strategy has much to commend it in the eyes of those who believe that counterterrorism consumes excessive US government attention and resources in an age of renewed great-power competition and other threats. The annual operational costs of this strategy would be relatively minimal—judging from recent operations, probably well under \$10 billion per year. By way of comparison,



the initial US intervention against the Islamic State cost roughly \$6.2 billion over its first eighteen months and involved a significantly greater commitment of forces than envisioned here.²⁹ Even if the United States pursued a light-footprint strategy in multiple locales—Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, Yemen—the total costs would remain comparatively low.

Admittedly, this strategy would still consume large amounts of surveillance, intelligence, and reconnaissance assets and unmanned strike capabilities, which are essential to executing the precisely targeted attacks that a light-footprint strategy entails. (During the Obama years, for instance, many counterterrorism strikes required dozens of hours of surveillance, if not more.)³⁰ Even so, this approach would hardly dominate the US military posture. In fact, it would free up resources within a constrained defense budget to pursue capabilities needed to deter Russia in Eastern Europe, preserve the United States' conventional superiority in the Western Pacific, and meet other pressing challenges. It would decrease the intense rhythm of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations that have affected the armed services' readiness to take on other missions. "The services are very good at counterinsurgency," a report issued by the House Armed Services committee noted in 2016, "but they are not prepared to endure a long fight against higher order threats from near-peer competitors."³¹ Indeed, it is no coincidence that Obama adopted a light-footprint strategy at a time when he was seeking to cut military spending and also to shift US military focus from the greater Middle East to other grand strategic priorities, such as rebalancing the Asia-Pacific region.³²

A light-footprint strategy might thus yield grand strategic benefits, at least in the near term. Unfortunately, it would probably confront severe challenges with respect to counterterrorism itself. Drones can be a formidable tool of counterterrorism; a punishing campaign of drone strikes played a key role in eviscerating al-Qaeda's Pakistan-based leadership between 2008 and 2011.³³ As a stand-alone strategy, however, drone strikes and other light-footprint measures are probably insufficient. After all, the period in which the Obama administration most emphasized the light-footprint approach (2011–14) was the period in which the US position in the war on terror deteriorated dramatically. Following the American military withdrawal from Iraq, Iraqi police and security forces were unable to contain the remnants of AQI. The result (when combined with the impact of the civil war in Syria) was the resurgence of that organization, its transformation into the Islamic State, and its catastrophic rampage across the heart of the Middle East.³⁴ Likewise, a light-footprint approach comprising drone strikes and security force assistance to the Yemeni government inflicted significant wounds on AQAP between 2009 and 2014, but that organization enjoyed a resurgence following the collapse of the Yemeni military and state under pressure from an externally supported Houthi rebellion in 2015.³⁵

In other areas, such as Somalia, variants of the light-footprint approach have managed to keep the threat from jihadist groups at more manageable levels. But the basic liability of this approach remains incontrovertible—that the local partners through which the United States would ideally prefer to work may not be strong enough to suppress the most capable jihadist organizations without more robust American military support.

So what about going to the other extreme and embracing a heavy-footprint option, one meant not just to suppress and weaken terrorist groups—the goal of the light footprint—but to transform the sociopolitical environment from which they spring? Under this approach, the United States would apply decisive military force—up to and including the deployment of tens of thousands of combat troops, or perhaps even more, in sustained combat operations—in order to destroy safe havens, deprive Islamic State-like organizations of the ability to plot and execute large-scale attacks, and otherwise achieve the rapid, decisive military defeat of the most dangerous terrorist organizations.

Moreover, based on the understanding that the rise of such groups is merely a symptom of political instability and deep sociopolitical pathologies that plague much of the greater Middle East, the United States would subsequently undertake long-term counterinsurgency and stabilization missions—akin to those in Iraq after 2003 and Afghanistan from 2009 to 2011—meant to foster the emergence of capable, legitimate government institutions that can provide order and peacefully address the grievances from which terrorism arises. A heavy-footprint approach would thus pair significant, medium- to long-term US military commitments with corresponding commitments of the economic and diplomatic resources that nation-building missions require.³⁶

In some ways, a heavy-footprint approach is strategically attractive, for there is little doubt that the United States can rapidly degrade and perhaps militarily defeat even the strongest jihadist groups if it is willing to commit the appropriate level of resources. AQI, for instance, was nearly decimated by the surge and its accompanying counterterrorism operations (in concert with the related Sunni Awakening movement) between 2007 and 2009.³⁷ And the heavy footprint offers—in principle, at least—a “theory of victory” as opposed to a “theory of enduring conflict” because it aims to address the root causes as well as the most dangerous ramifications of terrorist violence.

Yet the heavy-footprint approach, too, is fatally flawed. For one thing, even though the US military can probably crush the most threatening terrorist organizations, the history of the post-9/11 era does not inspire great confidence that even massive infusions of resources will suffice to transform broken Middle Eastern states into stable,



politically liberal societies. Perhaps the problem is, as some observers have argued, that the United States has not been willing to pursue adequately resourced nation-building missions for long enough to ensure lasting success.³⁸ But this point is itself debatable, and it simply highlights the fact that the grand strategic costs of sustained, heavy-footprint military presence in the Middle East will surely be immense.

Recall that US deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan severely taxed the armed forces' ability to respond to other threats even in the mid-2000s, when the American military was substantially larger and the global threat environment was substantially less threatening than today. As a result of US engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers acknowledged as early as May 2005, US forces "may be unable to meet expectations for speed or precision as detailed in our current plans."³⁹

Today, deploying tens of thousands of troops, or perhaps over one hundred thousand troops, to Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, or any other locale where dangerous jihadist groups have emerged, would make it nearly impossible for the United States to uphold its commitments in other parts of the world should they be seriously tested. Indeed, at a time when there are already severe and worsening doubts as to whether the US military can defend Taiwan from a determined Chinese assault, and when informed analysts agree that American and NATO forces in the Baltic are badly overmatched (locally, at least) by Russian forces, a heavy-footprint approach to the GWOT (global war on terror) would expose America to unacceptable grand strategic risks.⁴⁰ Absent dramatic increases in end strength and resources, such an approach would compound the readiness problems that the armed services already face, sharpen the trade-offs between strategic theaters and objectives, and create windows of opportunity for opponents looking to exploit US preoccupation. Analysts have recently argued that the United States is approaching a state of strategic insolvency as threats proliferate and capabilities stagnate or decline. The heavy-footprint approach would only exacerbate this problem.⁴¹

Nor does this approach appear politically salable. Majorities of Americans now view the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as mistakes, and there does not appear to be any appetite—among the public or within the current administration—for similarly prolonged, resource-intensive operations in the greater Middle East.⁴² It was only with great reluctance that Donald Trump decided to modestly augment the roughly thirteen thousand US troops in Afghanistan in 2017. Absent another 9/11-type shock to the American system, a commitment in an order of magnitude greater than that would presumably be a nonstarter.⁴³

Neither the light-footprint nor the heavy-footprint approach reconciles the competing strategic and grand strategic demands the United States faces in the war on terror.

There is, however, a third approach that is better suited to this task—the one, it so happens, around which presidents from both major parties have recently converged.

GWOT Good-Enough

This might be termed the medium-footprint approach. Under this approach, the United States would strike the most capable terrorist organizations through aggressive air campaigns. Yet contra the light footprint, this approach would utilize not only drones but also ground attack aircraft and forward-air controllers. US forces would target not only terrorist leadership and facilitators but all elements of jihadist organizations' combat power. This approach, moreover, would entail a robust ground component, featuring a regular dose of SOF and other operational raids to disrupt terrorist organizations and leadership, gain intelligence, and keep the enemy off balance. More aggressively still, the United States might deploy battalion- or even brigade-size units—either unilaterally or in concert with friendly partner forces—to carry out combat operations such as destroying terrorists' training grounds, rolling back their safe havens, and otherwise disrupting their ability to operate or hold territory. Because the medium-footprint strategy still necessarily relies more on partner forces than on American combat forces (particularly in clearing and holding territory), this approach would also involve well-resourced training, advisory, and assistance missions, featuring fairly forward-leaning approaches such as embedding American advisers at the battalion level. And in all cases, the emphasis of this approach would be less on casualty avoidance than on incentivizing—through flexible rules of engagement—the tactical initiative and adaptation needed to carry out an aggressive, evolving campaign. The medium footprint stops far short of the heavy footprint in terms of resources committed and overall aggressiveness, but it significantly exceeds the light footprint.

Similarly, a medium-footprint approach would not embrace full-scale nation-building, a reluctance informed by a sober understanding of just how difficult and expensive such missions can be. But it would involve the use of some economic and diplomatic resources to practice what might be called “nation-building lite”—prodding foreign officials to take the steps necessary to improve institutional and political performance at the margins and thereby enable effective military campaigns. In Iraq since 2014, for instance, the United States has not embraced anything like the full-on stabilization and nation-building missions of a decade prior. Yet American diplomats and military officials have worked diligently—and with mixed success—to prod Iraqi officials to take a more inclusive approach to governance, to marginalize sectarian Shiite militias, and otherwise encourage measures that will facilitate the likelihood of a successful counter-Islamic State campaign. In 2009–10, it was common to hear US officials speak of “Afghan good-enough” as the desired end-state in that country. The medium footprint might be thought of as an approach designed to produce “GWOT good-enough” in the broader struggle against jihadist terrorism.⁴⁴



If this approach sounds familiar, it is because both the Obama and Trump administrations somewhat reluctantly adopted variants of this strategy. From 2014 onward, Obama undertook a medium-footprint campaign to roll back Islamic State gains in Iraq and Syria. The United States deployed several thousand troops on the ground in Iraq and Syria (with additional forces in the region providing air support and other enablers) and carried out a campaign featuring all of the elements just noted, from escalating SOF and operational raids to increasingly aggressive airstrikes to strong support of the Iraqi and Syrian forces that were charged with clearing Islamic State-held territory.⁴⁵ With his speech on Afghanistan in August 2017, Trump embraced—reluctantly—a similar strategy in Afghanistan by deciding to modestly expand the US presence in that country to around seventeen thousand troops, bolster Afghan government forces, expand the US training and advisory mission, and intensify direct-action counterterrorism missions against the Taliban, as well as the Islamic State and resurgent al-Qaeda elements in that country.⁴⁶

In both cases, the logic was that a pure light-footprint approach was insufficient to maintain the pressure on dangerous extremist organizations and allow partner forces to take the strategic initiative, but that the United States must also resist the far deeper commitments implied in full-scale nation-building and heavy-footprint approaches. “We must stop the resurgence of safe havens that enable terrorists to threaten America,” Trump explained in August 2017, but “we are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists.”⁴⁷

To be sure, the medium-footprint option is rarely anyone’s preferred strategy. Because it still relies primarily on partner forces to clear and hold territory (even as US forces operate aggressively to accelerate these campaigns), it usually does not deliver even decisive operational results quickly—witness the steady but often excruciatingly slow pace of the counter-Islamic State campaign during 2015 and 2016, a time when it was continuing to mount lethal terrorist attacks in Europe and elsewhere.⁴⁸ But because the strategy does feature combat operations involving US ground troops, it comes with the virtual certainty of American casualties and it may seem *too* intensive for those who view any US military involvement in the greater Middle East as prelude to a quagmire. It is telling, in this regard, that both Obama and Trump resisted the medium-footprint strategy for some time. Moreover, although the medium-footprint approach is not excessively burdensome from a grand strategic or resource perspective (as discussed subsequently), it is undeniably *more* burdensome than the light-footprint approach.

The most notable disadvantage of the medium footprint, however, is that it offers nothing more than a long, hard slog with no promise of a conclusive triumph. If it is true that terrorism springs from sociopolitical pathologies and persistent instability in the greater Middle East, then putting an end to the threat requires ameliorating those root conditions. Yet, although the medium footprint does do a sort of “nation-building

lite” as a way of enabling better military performance on the part of the United States’ allies and of better sustaining any military gains, it does not deal deeply with root causes because of the massive financial and military costs involved. Rather, this approach is essentially one of aggressively suppressing the worst symptoms—globally capable terrorist groups that can operate from territorial safe havens—as opposed to curing the underlying disease of ideological radicalism and state incapacity. To use a different metaphor, the medium footprint approximates what the Israelis call “mowing the grass”—the idea being that just as grass regrows and must be cut again, new terrorist groups will emerge after their predecessors are defeated.⁴⁹ The medium footprint, although more aggressive than the light footprint, does not lead to lasting “victory” in the war on terror anytime soon. Rather, it guarantees that the nation will remain, as Clapper might have said, in a “perpetual state of suppression.”⁵⁰

Yet this model also boasts significant advantages—namely, that in a world of imperfect options, it comes closer than any other to resolving the strategy/grand strategy dilemma America faces in the war on terror. The medium-footprint approach fares better than the light-footprint approach, simply because it brings considerably more combat power to bear in suppressing the most dangerous jihadist groups and because it exploits a broader range of the unique assets—SOF, advise-and-assist capabilities, airstrikes, logistics, and sustainment—that the United States possesses and brings them together in synergistic ways. As the United States rediscovered during the counter-Islamic State campaign, for instance, more aggressive operational raids enable better collection of intelligence, which enables additional raids and more effective airstrikes, and so on.⁵¹ Likewise, this approach provides greater support to the partner forces that must ultimately clear and hold any territory taken by extremist groups by providing them with enhanced logistics and sustainment, permitting more extensive training and advisory missions, offering close air support in tactical settings, and thereby decreasing the possibility that those forces will simply collapse under pressure, as happened in Iraq in 2013–14.⁵² And when this approach has been pursued aggressively in the past, it has delivered decent results at an acceptable price.

The medium-footprint model was used in Afghanistan in 2001–02, for instance, when several thousand US troops and CIA paramilitaries—backed up by robust airpower and partnered with Northern Alliance forces—routed al-Qaeda and the Taliban (killing perhaps 80 percent of the former organization’s membership then based in Afghanistan) and sent bin Laden’s group into survival mode, all at a mercifully small cost in US lives.⁵³ The medium-footprint approach employed by Obama got off to a slow start between August 2014 and mid-2015, but as it was gradually intensified, it proved increasingly effective in empowering Iraqi and friendly Syrian forces to take the offensive and sustain their subsequent gains against the Islamic State. By the time Obama left office in early 2017, US-backed forces had retaken most of northeastern Syria from the Islamic State; its key strongholds in Iraq such as



Ramadi and Fallujah had been liberated; operations against Mosul and Raqqa were under way; and the Islamic State's military power and ideological prestige were in sharp decline. The costs of this success were far lower than might have been the case with a heavier US footprint. As of late 2016, the US-led coalition had killed about forty-five thousand Islamic State fighters at the cost of only a handful of American service-members' lives.⁵⁴

Indeed, it was precisely because the approach seemed to be working—it was steadily rolling back the most formidable terrorist organization since al-Qaeda at its peak at an acceptable cost—that the Trump administration largely adopted that approach and reportedly rejected proposals to insert significantly higher numbers of US ground forces to complete the liberation of Islamic State-held areas in Syria and Western Iraq.⁵⁵ In short, if one accepts that there is no final victory over terrorism in sight—not at a price worth paying, in any event—and that the goal is simply to suppress and disrupt terrorist groups as they emerge, then a medium-footprint approach does hold some promise.

Unlike the heavy footprint, moreover, the medium-footprint approach is not unbearable from a grand strategic perspective. There are indeed resource costs: the counter-Islamic State campaign cost roughly \$11 billion from August 2014 through February 2017, with the monthly cost escalating as the campaign intensified.⁵⁶ That campaign also consumed significant quantities of guided munitions as well as other strike and intelligence assets.⁵⁷ But the costs involved here were still a fraction of a roughly \$600 billion annual defense budget and the manpower demands of such campaigns are relatively modest. To be sure, the United States would still face severe difficulties in defending allies in increasingly contested theaters such as Eastern Europe and East Asia under this approach and it will need to expand its supply of munitions and other critical capabilities to have any hope of addressing these challenges effectively. But these difficulties have more to do with the constrained Defense Department topline and the inherent challenge of containing Russian and Chinese power within their respective “near abroads” than with the competing demands of counterterrorism strategy.⁵⁸

This approach is also more salable politically than the heavy footprint, precisely because its human and resource costs are so much lower—and it may also be superior to the light footprint if indeed it helps avert catastrophic setbacks such as the Islamic State's rampage across Iraq in 2014. As evidence of the former assertion, consider that, even though most Americans believe the war in Afghanistan was a mistake, there is no groundswell of opposition today to keeping between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand troops in that country indefinitely—and that groundswell likely will not emerge so long as American troops are not sustaining heavy casualties on a regular basis. And while there are always political difficulties associated with

deploying US troops in the greater Middle East, this approach is far more tolerable for friendly governments than are the vastly greater deployments envisioned under the heavy footprint. The medium-footprint approach is no panacea, then, but it better squares the competing demands of strategy and grand strategy than any of the likely alternatives.

Conclusion

Strategy often entails choosing between imperfect and even bad options. Grand strategy is the art of making these choices in a world of severe constraints. There are a limited number of military strategies the United States can pursue in an age of enduring terror, and all have their flaws. But the medium-footprint approach is best suited to providing an acceptable level of security vis-à-vis the most dangerous jihadist groups at an acceptable grand strategic cost.

In pursuing such a strategy, however, three crucial caveats and warnings must be kept in mind. First, the medium footprint is a *military* strategy, not a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy, and so it must be paired with aggressive but sensible measures in other realms if it is to succeed. In particular, although the medium footprint does not feature full-scale nation-building, it still does require diplomatic and other forms of engagement with partner groups and nations. It cannot succeed if military power is emphasized *to the exclusion* of other US capabilities, such as diplomacy and development. Seeking to pursue a medium-footprint approach while also slashing investment in the State Department, US Agency for International Development, and other “soft power” parts of the federal bureaucracy, as the Trump administration sought to do in 2017, is thus a recipe for disappointment.⁵⁹

Second, a medium-footprint approach requires that policy makers—and the American public—keep their expectations limited. The medium-footprint approach will not deliver a decisive, emotionally satisfying victory in the war on terror anytime soon, if ever. It is essentially an aggressive version of “mowing the grass.” As a result, it is an inherently frustrating approach—not least because, in many cases, it will only move as quickly as America’s partners on the ground. To execute this strategy, policy makers must possess a great deal of patience and persistence, something that is often hard to come by in a messy, boisterous democracy. They must also avoid the temptation to overpromise with respect to what the strategy can achieve.

This leads to a final caveat, which is that policy makers must maintain strict rhetorical discipline. Promising that a medium-footprint approach will lead to decisive victory—as Donald Trump did in his televised speech on Afghanistan in 2017—is a recipe for trouble.⁶⁰ It raises the risk of public disillusion when such promises cannot be fulfilled and it increases the danger that policy makers will feel compelled to escalate when



a speedy victory is not achieved. Getting the military strategy right is not enough; the rhetoric is also essential. A good-enough approach to counterterrorism is all the United States can afford in an era of competing security threats and contested primacy. American leaders need to accustom the public to that reality.

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