After bin Laden: Ending the war on terrorism

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OPPOSING THE U.S.: Afghan protesters shout anti-U.S. slogans during a demonstration in Taloqan, in the Takhar Province north of Kabul, on May 19. They took to the streets to protest a nighttime NATO raid in the area that left four people dead. NATO later said the dead were insurgents, while Afghan officials said they were civilians. © AP PHOTO / EZATULLAH PAMIR

Even before Osama bin Laden's death, President Obama had announced plans to begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan in July. The pace of that withdrawal is unclear. But absent clear evidence that the U.S. and its allies are on track to defeat the Taliban militarily—and such evidence is nowhere to be seen—the key to creating conditions that permit a drawdown of Western forces is to negotiate an end to hostilities.

According to the *Washington Post,* the administration has been seeking to step up its efforts to bring the Taliban (or at least substantial elements of it) in from the cold.

In the words of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the U.S. is extending an invitation to the Taliban "to come into the political process and denounce al-Qaeda and renounce violence and agree to abide by the laws and constitution of Afghanistan."

Richard Lugar, the senior Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, recently made this eminently sensible point: "With al-Qaeda largely displaced from the country but franchised in other locations, Afghanistan does not carry a strategic value that justifies 100,000 U.S. troops." Lugar might have added that Afghanistan is not worth the $100 billion per year the Pentagon is currently spending in a vain attempt to pacify that country.

No one can guarantee how Taliban leaders will respond to offers of reconciliation or whether next year or five years from now they will abide by any deal that they agree to today. Still, with al-Qaeda's supreme leader out of the way, now is the time to test the proposition. The longest war in American history must end. Any deal acceptable to Afghan president Hamid Karzai should be acceptable to President Obama as well.

The war in Afghanistan is not the only conflict that should end. The whole notion of war as a response to jihadism ought to be junked—and the sooner the better.

In a moment of extraordinary candor, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates remarked not long ago that "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 MacArthur so delicately put it."

The outgoing defense secretary's comment predated the commando raid that eliminated bin Laden. In that raid, a handful of Navy SEALs accomplished what tens of thousands of conventional troops had been unable to do despite years of trying.

The columnist George Will put his finger on the significance of what had occurred: the raid on bin Laden's house in Abbottabad "more resembles excellent police work than a military operation."

For years, critics of Bush's and Obama's wars have insisted that in dealing with the problem of violent anti-Western jihadists, the emphasis on military means has been misplaced. A more appropriate approach is to mobilize a sustained and well-resourced international police effort, not to "defeat" the terrorist groups but to dismantle them. Will's conclusion—that "the enormous military footprint in Afghanistan, next door to bin Laden's Pakistan refuge, seems especially

disproportionate in the wake of his elimination by a small cadre of specialists"—now appears indisputable.

The members of Congress from both parties urging the president in light of bin Laden's death to "declare victory and come home" are on to something. It's time to begin a transition away from war and toward redefining the terrorist threat as primarily a matter for intelligence and policing.

The Obama administration's one indisputable contribution to Washington's post-9/11 strategic perspective has been to acknowledge the importance of Pakistan—symbolized by the coining of the term *AfPak* for that geographic region. The Obama administration has expanded U.S. military efforts in Pakistan. Primarily relying on missile-firing drones (although with occasional cross-border raids), Washington has sought to erode the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces hunkered down in Pakistan's wild border areas. Attacking these jihadists in their Pakistani sanctuaries was expected to augment allied efforts to stabilize Afghanistan; fewer bad guys could cross the border to fuel the insurgency.

The actual effect has been somewhat different. If anything, drone attacks are serving to further destabilize Pakistan, with potentially disastrous implications. Resentment on the Pakistani street and in the senior ranks of the Pakistani security apparatus at repeated U.S. violations of their country's sovereignty (along with the occasional killing of Pakistani soldiers and noncombatants) has elevated anti-Americanism to new heights. Although arguably helping to dismantle al-Qaeda's links to Afghanistan and the Taliban, these relentless drone strikes seem also to be fueling anti-U.S. sentiment on which terrorist groups like the Haqqani network thrive. While these groups pose less of a threat to the U.S. and Europe, they have the potential to destabilize Pakistan and inflame tensions with India.

So here too a course change is in order. Pakistan is a very large, economically underdeveloped nation, with weak institutions and a military defined by its disdain for civilian rule and a paranoid obsession with India as a looming threat. It has a nuclear arsenal and a penchant for engaging in the illegal proliferation of elements of that arsenal. It contains indigenous terrorist groups and seething Islamist resentment toward the West.

If the United States has a vital interest in this part of the world beyond the dismantling of al-Qaeda, it is to prevent Pakistan from becoming a failed state. Yet

U.S. policies over the past decade have increased rather than reduced the likelihood of that outcome.

With bin Laden out of the way, intrusive U.S. military activities in Pakistan should cease. Washington's emphasis should shift toward economic assistance, the nurturing of civil society and encouraging the Pakistani officer corps to take a more enlightened view of the threats endangering their country. If the U.S. can make a decisive contribution, it will lie in the realm of diplomacy. It's time for the State Department to elevate the ancient Pakistani-Indian dispute over Kashmir to a matter of first-order importance.

The disastrous war in Iraq, the disappointing war in Afghanistan and the severity of the Great Recession have already begun to focus the minds of military and civilian leaders on the need to rethink the role of American military might. For example, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, has called the national debt the "biggest single threat to national security." The Pentagon had proposed its own set of cuts months ago. On April 13, weeks before the death of bin Laden, the president announced his proposal to reduce defense spending. He framed his proposal—cuts as great as $400 billion over ten years—not only as a response to the fiscal crisis but also as part of a "fundamental review of America's missions, capabilities and our role in a changing world."

This is precisely correct. The immediate question is not "How much?" but "What for?" The era of American global hegemony—if such an era ever existed—is ending. Events have demolished expectations, commonly expressed by Democrats and Republicans alike during the interval between the cold war and the war on terror, that U.S. military dominance would enable the U.S. to reign supreme on the global stage. We are entering an age of multipolarity. The U.S. will continue to be a very important player—probably the most important—on the global stage, but it will not be the only player of consequence. Washington will find itself obliged to take into account—even to accommodate—the interests of others, especially China, India and the European Union.

The emergence of this multipolar order will not render military power obsolete. The Pentagon is not going to run out of things to keep American soldiers busy. Yet what exactly Americans should look to their military to do now emerges as an urgent question. The death of Osama bin Laden offers the right occasion to tackle such questions head-on.