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America's "Sinkhole Wars" for the Greater Middle East

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Here's last week's good news on America's war fronts: finally, there's light at the end of the tunnel!

From one end of the Greater Middle East to the other, things are looking up for Washington. A U.S. Air Force drone struck for the first time in Baluchistan province and took out the leader of the Taliban with two Hellfire missiles (whereupon the Pakistani government denounced Washington for violating the country's sovereignty). The action was taken, President Obama later announced, as part of "our longstanding effort to bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan." (Admittedly, you may not have heard much about such peace and prosperity recently with fierce fighting raging on Afghan battlefields, the Taliban gainingground, the government in its usual pit of corruption, and the country maintaining its proud position as the uncontested global leader in the production and sale of opium.)

Soon after, the president paid a historic visit to Vietnam and finally put to bed memories of a disastrous American war there in the only way conceivable — by ensuring that American arms and munitions would once again be allowed to flow freely into that country. And while he was at it, he sternly rebuked China (without mentioning it by name) for its actions in the waters off Vietnam. "Nations are sovereign," he said, "and no matter how large or small a nation may be, its territory should be respected."

On the other side of the Greater Middle East, U.S. Green Berets were photographed in northern Syria engaged with Kurdish rebels in fighting aimed at someday retaking Raqqa, the "capital" of the Islamic State. Several of those soldiers were wearing the insignia of the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Forces, or YPG (which the Turkish government considers a terrorist outfit), even as the Pentagon continued to insist that theirs was a non-combat role. In other words — in the good news category — those boots, whatever the photos might seem to indicate, were not actually on the ground. Meanwhile, some genuinely upbeat news arrived in the midst of a little distinctly out-of-date bad news. Members of the U.S. team now conducting the air war against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq told New York Timesreporter Eric Schmitt that, despite thousands of air strikes, their predecessors had essentially botched the job, thanks to "poor intelligence collection and clumsy process for identifying targets." Fortunately, they were now in charge and the results were stunning. The Islamic State was finally being hit in its pocketbook, where it truly hurts, damaging its "ability to pay its fighters, govern, and attract new recruits."

"Every bomb now has a greater impact," reported U.S. air war commander Lieutenant General Charles Brown Jr. Yes, after 15 years of American air war across the Greater Middle

East, it seems that, from Pakistan to Syria, the Obama administration has finally found the winning formula. If, as Schmitt's piece indicated, you want confirmation of that, who better to turn to than the very people who have gotten the formula right? Having no access to similar in-the-know figures capable of throwing light on the subject of Washington's ongoing conflicts, TomDispatch instead turned to outsider Andrew Bacevich, author most recently of a groundbreaking book, America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History, to assess the recent spate of upbeat news from America's war zones. We sent him directly into that infamous Vietnam-era tunnel of darkness to see what might be glimpsed so many decades later when it comes to the American way of war, and here's his report. Tom

Milestones (Or What Passes for Them in Washington)

A Multi-Trillion-Dollar Bridge to Nowhere in the Greater Middle East

By Andrew J. Bacevich

We have it on highest authority: the recent killing of Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan marks "an important milestone." So the president of the United States has declared, with that claim duly echoed and implicitly endorsed by media commentary — the*New York Times* reporting, for example, that Mansour's death leaves the Taliban leadership "shocked" and "shaken."

But a question remains: A milestone toward what exactly?

Toward victory? Peace? Reconciliation? At the very least, toward the prospect of the violence abating? Merely posing the question is to imply that U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Islamic world serve some larger purpose.

Yet for years now that has not been the case. The assassination of Mansour instead joins a long list of previous milestones, turning points, and landmarks briefly heralded as significant achievements only to prove much less than advertised.

One imagines that Obama himself understands this perfectly well. Just shy of five years ago, he was urging Americans to "take comfort in knowing that the tide of war is receding." In Iraq and Afghanistan, the president insisted, "the light of a secure peace can be seen in the distance."

"These long wars," he promised, were finally coming to a "responsible end." We were, that is, finding a way out of Washington's dead-end conflicts in the Greater Middle East.

Who can doubt Obama's sincerity, or question his oft-expressed wish to turn away from war and focus instead on unattended needs here at home? But wishing is the easy part. Reality has remained defiant. Even today, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that George W. Bush bequeathed to Obama show no sign of ending.

Like Bush, Obama will bequeath to *his* successor wars he failed to finish. Less remarked upon, he will also pass along to President Clinton or President Trump new wars that are his own handiwork. In Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and several other violence-wracked African nations, the Obama legacy is one ofever-deepening U.S. military involvement. The almost certain prospect of a further accumulation of briefly celebrated and quickly forgotten "milestones" beckons.

During the Obama era, the tide of war has not receded. Instead, Washington finds itself drawn ever deeper into conflicts that, once begun, become interminable — wars for which the vaunted U.S. military has yet to devise a plausible solution.

The Oldest (Also Latest) Solution: Bombs Away

Once upon a time, during the brief, if heady, interval between the end of the Cold War and 9/11 when the United States ostensibly reigned supreme as the world's "sole superpower," Pentagon field manuals credited U.S. forces with the ability to achieve "quick, decisive victory — on and off the battlefield — anywhere in the world and under virtually any conditions." Bold indeed (if not utterly delusional) would be the staff officer willing to pen such words today.

To be sure, the United States military routinely demonstrates astonishing technical prowess — putting a pair of Hellfire missiles through the roof of the taxi in which Mansour was riding, for example. Yet if winning — that is, ending wars on conditions favorable to our side — offers the measure of merit by which to judge a nation's military forces, then when put to the test ours have been found wanting.

Not for lack of trying, of course. In their quest for a formula that might actually accomplish the mission, those charged with directing U.S. military efforts in the Greater Middle East have demonstrated notable flexibility. They have employed overwhelming force and "shock-and awe." They have tried regime change (bumping off Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, for example) and "decapitation" (assassinating Mansour and a host of other militant leaders, including Osama Bin Laden). They have invaded and occupied countries, even giving military-style nation-building a whirl. They have experimented with counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention, retaliatory strikes and preventive war. They have operated overtly, covertly, and through proxies. They have equipped, trained, and advised — and when the beneficiaries of these exertions have folded in the face of the enemy, they have equipped, trained, and advised some more. They have converted American reservists into quasi-regulars, subject to repeated combat tours. In imitation of the corporate world, they have outsourced as well, handing over to profit-oriented "private security" firms functions traditionally performed by soldiers. In short, they have labored doggedly to translate American military power into desired political outcomes.

In this one respect at least, an endless parade of three- and four-star generals exercising command in various theaters over the past several decades have earned high marks. In terms of effort, they deserve an A.

As measured by outcomes, however, they fall well short of a passing grade. However commendable their willingness to cast about for some method that might actually work, they have ended up waging a war of attrition. Strip away the light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel reassurances regularly heard at Pentagon press briefings or in testimony presented on Capitol Hill and America's War for the Greater Middle East proceeds on this unspoken assumption: if we kill enough people for a long enough period of time, the other side will eventually give in.

On that score, the prevailing Washington gripe directed at Commander-in-Chief Obama is that he has not been willing to kill enough. Take, for example, a recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed penned by that literary odd couple, retired General David Petraeus and

Brookings Institution analyst Michael O'Hanlon, that appeared under the pugnacious headline "Take the Gloves Off Against the Taliban." To turn around the longest war in American history, Petraeus and O'Hanlon argue, the United States just needs to drop more bombs.

The rules of engagement currently governing air operations in Afghanistan are, in their view, needlessly restrictive. Air power "represents an asymmetric Western advantage, relatively safe to apply, and very effective." (The piece omits any mention of incidents such as the October 2015 destruction of a Doctors Without Borders hospital in the Afghan provincial capital of Kunduz by a U.S. Air Force gunship.) More ordnance will surely produce "some version of victory." The path ahead is clear. "Simply waging the Afghanistan air-power campaign with the vigor we are employing in Iraq and Syria," the authors write with easy assurance, should do the trick.

When armchair generals cite the ongoing U.S. campaign in Iraq and Syria as a model of effectiveness, you know that things must be getting desperate.

Granted, Petraeus and O'Hanlon are on solid ground in noting that as the number of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan has decreased, so, too, has the number of air strikes targeting the Taliban. Back when more allied boots were on the ground, more allied planes were, of course, overhead. And yet the 100,000 close-air-support sorties flown between 2011 and 2015 — that's more than one sortie per Taliban fighter — did not, alas, yield "some version of victory." In short, we've already tried the Petraeus-O'Hanlon take-the-gloves-off approach to defeating the Taliban. It didn't work. With the Afghanistan War's 15th anniversary now just around the corner, to suggest that we can bomb our way to victory there is towering nonsense.

In Washington, Big Thinking and Small

Petraeus and O'Hanlon characterize Afghanistan as "the eastern bulwark in our broader Middle East fight." Eastern sinkhole might be a more apt description. Note, by the way, that they have nothing useful to say about the "broader fight" to which they allude. Yet that broader fight — undertaken out of the conviction, still firmly in place today, that American military assertiveness can somehow repair the Greater Middle East — is far more deserving of attention than how to employ very expensive airplanes against insurgents armed with inexpensive Kalashnikovs.

To be fair, in silently passing over the broader fight, Petraeus and O'Hanlon are hardly alone. On this subject no one has much to say — not other stalwarts of the onward-to-victory school, nor officials presently charged with formulating U.S. national security policy, nor members of the Washington commentariat eager to pontificate about almost anything. Worst of all, the subject is one on which each of the prospective candidates for the presidency is mum.

From Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford on down to the lowliest blogger, opinions about how best to wage a particular campaign in that broader fight are readily available. Need a plan for rolling back the Islamic State? Glad you asked. Concerned about that new ISIS franchise in Libya? Got you covered. Boko Haram? Here's what you need to know. Losing sleep over Al-Shabab? Take heart — big thinkers are on the case.

As to the broader fight itself, however, no one has a clue. Indeed, it seems fair to say that merely defining our aims in that broader fight, much less specifying the means to achieve them, heads the list of issues that people in Washington studiously avoid. Instead, they prattle endlessly about the Taliban and ISIS and Boko Haram and al-Shabab.

Here's the one thing you need to know about the broader fight: *there is no strategy.* None. Zilch. We're on a multi-trillion-dollar bridge to nowhere, with members of the national security establishment more or less content to see where it leads.

May I suggest that we find ourselves today in what might be called a Khe Sanh moment? Older readers will recall that back in late 1967 and early 1968 in the midst of the Vietnam War, one particular question gripped the national security establishment and those paid to attend to its doings: Can Khe Sanh hold?

Now almost totally forgotten, Khe Sanh was then a battlefield as well known to Americans as Fallujah was to become in our own day. Located in the northern part of South Vietnam, it was the site of a besieged and outnumbered Marine garrison, surrounded by two full enemy divisions. In the eyes of some observers, the outcome of the Vietnam War appeared to hinge on the ability of the Marines there to hold out — to avoid the fate that had befallen the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu slightly more than a decade earlier. For France, the fall of Dien Bien Phu had indeed spelled final defeat in Indochina.

Was history about to repeat itself at Khe Sanh? As it turned out, no… and yes.

The Marines did hold — a milestone! — and the United States lost the war anyway.

In retrospect, it seems pretty clear that those responsible for formulating U.S. policy back then fundamentally misconstrued the problem at hand. Rather than worrying about the fate of Khe Sanh, they ought to have been asking questions like these: Is the Vietnam War winnable? Does it even make sense? If not, why are we there? And above all, does no alternative exist to simply pressing on with a policy that shows no signs of success?

Today the United States finds itself in a comparable situation. What to do about the Taliban or ISIS is not a trivial question. Much the same can be said regarding the various other militant organizations with which U.S. forces are engaged in a variety of countries — many now failing states — across the Greater Middle East.

But the question of how to take out organization X or put country Y back together pales in comparison with the other questions that should by now have come to the fore but haven't. Among the most salient are these: Does waging war across a large swath of the Islamic world make sense? When will this broader fight end? What will it cost? Short of reducing large parts of the Middle East to rubble, is that fight winnable in any meaningful sense? Above all, does the world's most powerful nation have no other choice but to persist in pursuing a manifestly futile endeavor?

Try this thought experiment. Imagine the opposing candidates in a presidential campaign each refusing to accept war as the new normal. Imagine them actually taking stock of the broader fight that's been ongoing for decades now. Imagine them offering alternatives to armed conflicts that just drag on and on. Now *that* would be a milestone.

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