Reducing United States Military Involvement

Nicolas Pacheco
University of New Hampshire, Durham
Reducing United States Military Involvement

Nicolas Pacheco

ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the effect that a tactical reduction of United States military personnel could potentially have on the threat of terrorism against the American homeland. While terrorist factions employ varying strategies to further their causes of opposition to western society and occupation, the United States continues to discreetly carry out policies that support incumbent governments and pursue high-risk targets at the risk of civilian casualties. The impact of this hostility can be derived from historical perspectives of neocolonialism and hegemony, but it is crucial to continue to maintain global security interests to prevent international terrorism. This paper explains the importance of the intelligence aspect of counter-terrorism and the various suggestions of transparency and better utilization of resources to uphold prevention of homeland terrorism.

A strategic reduction of the United States of America's military involvement and presence in specific foreign nations would not significantly reduce the threat of terrorism against the US homeland. In justifying this statement and assessing terrorism against the homeland, it is important to consider that both the threat of international incidents of terrorism as well as domestic terrorism have steadily decreased since 2001. The term “terrorism” is essentially a Western neologism – a loosely defined phrase made prevalent by America, and to a lesser extent Europe, which often suggests racist connotations. The foreign policy strategy of the United States is based upon responses to threats that have arisen throughout history, posing significant risk to global security interests (Davis et al. 2012: 1). When speculating on an issue of foreign policy, especially one that is kept exceptionally private by the United States government, it is important to disseminate the few facts given in order to allow reasonable assertions to be made by the US citizenry. In approaching military reduction analytically and logically, domestic and international economies, the sequestration, deterrence, and danger of an attack on the homeland should be considered. The question then becomes not whether reducing US military presence will decrease the apparent threat, but if this reduction will result in more attacks on the homeland.

As of December 31, 2012, the United States Department of Defense claimed that there were 172,966 active duty military deployed in foreign countries (“Total Military Personnel and Dependent End Strength by Service, Regional Area, and Country”). The US Overseas Basing Commission claims that “the basing posture of the United States, particularly its overseas basing, is the skeleton of national security upon which flesh and muscle will be molded to enable us to protect our national interests and the interests of our allies, not just today, but for decades to come” (Cornella et al. 2007: 5). However, this presence as a military powerhouse with bases strategically positioned in a considerable number of countries as well as countries whose previous history – genocides, civil wars, and dictatorial rule – called for US occupation generates resentment from innocent civilians who see the US as an autocratic war machine.

The United States’ history of asserting itself in an overly aggressive manner is a crucial factor when examining United States foreign policy. When looking at World War II, the US dropped bombs that decimated essential Japanese infrastructure as well as killing thousands of innocent civilians. This act was executed in response to the Japanese attacking the United States homeland; less publicized were the firebombings in Dresden. In the case of Dresden, the US and Britain annihilated crucial military and industry targets which also resulted in the complete destruction of a major city, accompanied by thousands of civilian casualties (Crane 2007). Noncombatant fatalities have been a continuing trend, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq, where civilians are repeatedly caught in the crossfire resulting in collateral damage.
in order to eliminate necessary targets. The use of drone strikes to carry out these attacks have also been looked upon negatively by both civilians and advocates for eradication of these tactics due to the inhumane aspect of incidental killing of non-targets. When analyzing the negative connotation occupation has, the difference in culture comes into play as well (Van Evera 2005). Influence from propaganda and the supposed seductiveness and decadence of American culture often offends the religious values of more traditional Islamists.

The fact that the United States military most often supports the governments in the countries in which US bases are located further irritates the civilians as well. The people often feel more suppressed by their government when the US is present because they feel less safe. If the civilians attempt to protest against the incumbent government or US presence, US military support to the occupied country’s government through weaponry and funding make it easier to overpower the requests of the people. In a situation where the government could not suppress the demands of the people, they would be forced to reason with them resulting in negotiations that would more accurately reflect the overall mandates of the majority. However, the government’s ability to overwhelm the majority’s complaints due to US support often results in the disapproval of the US being present.

Realistically the concept of “terrorism” will never be completely wiped off the map. The primary objective of not only the United States, but also of the Western alliance, is to develop a strategy to minimalize terrorism as close as possible to the point of elimination. However, reducing terrorism is not as easy as pulling out, especially when the reason the area was initially occupied was due to the threat of terror. If military foreign policy were as easy as deciding to reduce military presence or not, simply employing one of these strategies would theoretically prove or disprove the thesis of this paper: that a reduction of presence would not decrease the threat of terror against the United States homeland. If the United States evacuated forces from areas that did not want their presence, it might make the threat of terror on the homeland more low-risk in the short-term aspect. However, doing so would also weaken the US’ international position, in effect causing the homeland to become more susceptible to future attacks.

There are varying degrees of revulsion towards the United States, Britain, and France in general from the greater Middle East, but a hefty amount of that disgust is geared towards their culture and foreign policies. This stems from colonialism, the slicing up of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, neocolonialism, CIA and military interventions, and the absolute support for the state of Israel in Palestine. Ideological differences between the liberal West and conservative Islam, stemming from historical hegemony and current occupation, add to the distaste as well, being fundamental in Middle Eastern identity and culture. Many Middle Easterners identify with their opinion on US presence and whether they support or condemn the actions of radicals and this strength in identity is often used as a unification tool. Terrorism is an apparent result of this disfavor of US presence. However, it appears to be more complex an issue involving more sociological aspects rather than simply being justified due to factors such as neocolonialism and subjugation of their land. As described by McCauley and Moskalenko, the action of terrorism requires perpetrators who radicalize for a reason: personal grievances, group identification, love, risk, status, power, isolation, competition, or a slippery slope combination of the elements (McCauley & Moskalenko 2011: 206-9).

When looked at objectively, the tactics used by terrorist groups today, such as al Qaeda and the Taliban, can be compared to the type of strategies that were used by colonists during the American Revolution; essentially, asymmetrical warfare employing incongruent methods of military capabilities. In both cases, a nation came onto the land with an objective, but was faced with groups of rebels who did not welcome the presence of that nation. However, it was hard to separate the rebels from innocent civilians because the actions of the smaller groups were not necessarily representative of the whole country’s opinions. This made it harder for the invading nation to attack and cripple a large portion of the rebels
because there was not one designated location populated solely by rebels. Historically, rebels could blend easily with civilians, seeing as most did not wear the traditional uniform.

The research and analysis conducted by Davis et al. (2012) elaborates on the strategic approaches the United States could make to improve policy and decision-making regarding overseas military presence. Davis et al. suggest that “choosing to reduce overseas US military presence does not make sense if the perspective is that overseas US presence plays an important role in deterring and responding to one or more of the threats that China, North Korea, and Iran pose and in reassuring US allies and other partners” (pp. 8). Although the United States was previously reducing the number of soldiers deployed overseas, it was mainly accomplishing this goal through the use of sequestration. This sequestration involved cutting $42 billion from the defense budget in an effort to reduce the national debt. However, the White House’s National Security Strategy does not consider attacks from terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda, as the biggest immediate threat to the homeland. The more enduring global US security interests primarily consist of: protecting the US’ allies and partners, as well as the US itself, from state adversaries; promoting US influence in key regions; and dissuading military competition and arms races in general (Davis et al. 2012: 9). Specifically the US is interested in protecting Asian allies from China and North Korea, Middle East associates from Syria, Iran, and non-state groups, and both Asia and Europe as a whole from Russia. These areas are of significant focus to US foreign policy largely because attacks on these lands could pose major threats to the US in the future. These three US global security interests do not “imply that the other global security interests of protecting Americans from terrorist attacks and defending against economic or other disruptions are not important or that these first three security interests would have priority for the United States in the future” (Davis et al. 2012: 9). Keeping focus on controlling these constant pressures is crucial in protecting the homeland.

Maintaining the global security interests against nations such as North Korea, China, and Iran are subsequently critical because the highest risk of attack from terrorist non-state groups could potentially be when the United States’ military is engaged in combat with opponent nations overseas (United States Department of Defense 2012: 7). Speculation that this might be the case is reinforced when taken into consideration that the US focus is generally on deterring nations from warfare rather than concentrating primarily on counterterrorism. In this case, the US would have more forces fixated on these areas, leaving the homeland weaker and more susceptible to attack; essentially leading to the fighting of two separate wars.

Currently, the strategic repositioning of the United States armed forces should be addressed when discussing the sequester. Because the sequester has, by design, resulted in a decrease of the number of soldiers overseas, placing the armed forces that will remain in areas that will most effectively utilize their presence is absolutely vital for both the United States’ economy as well as its global interest. In narrowing the focus of which bases to emphasize the armed forces presence in, such as Southeast Asia, the US would cut unnecessary defense expenses while maintaining the tactical bases needed for generating fundamental intelligence. Because the threat of international terrorism is perpetually changing, “choosing to emphasize the Middle East [in regard to the concentration of remaining forces following the sequester] would have the United States rely more on surging military forces from the United States for contingencies in Asia and keeping bases in the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Africa to be able to blunt quickly any attacks on US partners and to provide reassurance” (Davis et al. 2012: 8).

The report from the National Commission on Terrorism maintains that in comparison to the mid-eighties, at present there are drastically fewer accounts of international terrorism. However, the growing objective in terrorist action is to kill as many people as possible on a larger scale. Where guns and conventional explosives are the most recurring weapon used by terrorist organizations, many are looking to carry out large scale attacks that kill a mass amount of people at once through attempting to acquire CBRNs (chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear materials). These terrorists who wish to execute attacks on
US soil often share similar characteristics in that their objectives are more deadly, they use modern
technologies to communicate quickly and efficiently, are organized into small decentralized cells, and they
operate both in the United States and abroad. Their funding and procedural networks are harder to trace as
well because they are not dependent on state sponsors, making it more difficult to interfere with their
practices using economic sanctions (National Commission on Terrorism).

The most effective way to combat the threat of international terrorism is through reliable
intelligence, all of which would become tremendously difficult to obtain if important bases in the Middle
East were not improperly utilized or altogether abandoned. One of the paramount complaints surfacing
from many countries of the Islamic world, including those governed by terrorist factions is the occupation
of their land and not necessarily the number of troops present (Lawrence 2005: 171). Reducing the amount
of soldiers would clearly not satisfy their complaint, bearing in mind that a substantial number of soldiers
would remain nonetheless. However, the occupation of the land is not the only issue that terrorists have
with the United States; therefore the reduction of soldiers alone in the Middle East would not effectively
reduce actions promoting terrorism. Among the popular sentiments for protests denoted by Islamic nations
against America, as indicated by bin Laden; the spread of American immorality, lies, and oppression, the
fact that the US is not an Islamic state, the support of Israel along with other nations (India, Russia, Manila
Government) that oppress Muslims, support of corrupt Middle Eastern government leaders, and policies of
subjugation. Bin Laden claims that if the US fails “to respond to all these conditions, then prepare to fight
with the umma, the Nation of Monotheism, which puts complete trust in God and fears none other than
Him” (Lawrence 2005: 168-171). Even if the US removed troops from lands under the influence of radicals
to focus on other areas that are more ideal strategically, from both an economic and militaristic standpoint,
bin Laden clearly states that there are other grounds present to which radical Islamists could justify attacking
the United States on.

From a libertarian standpoint, it is easy to understand the argument for removing all troops from
foreign nations, especially those ardently seeking this alternative. Many voices across the globe have argued
for bringing American troops home – that there is no reason for continued occupation of combat zones such
as Afghanistan and it is not the United States’ responsibility to act as a world intermediary. Osama bin
Laden, in his interviews and statements, has consistently stated that his reason for taking up arms against the
US is not because of disagreement with American culture and freedom, but rather the subjugation of their
holy homeland (Lawrence 2005: 171). Although these statements are what he claims to want, how can
officials trust a terrorist’s “honest” opinion and not expect ulterior motives? It could be the case that these
claims are part of the long-term strategy to gain a larger support base and eventually get the United States
to concede as well as the American public to give up constitutionally designated civil rights and liberties. If
the United States did pull all troops from Afghanistan, it is difficult to expect that factions such as Al Qaeda
would immediately transfer the focus of their attacks elsewhere; rather it might be the case that these
groups occupy abandoned US bases in attempt to amass further military power in the Middle East. If this
were to become the future reality, unrest over governmental power and, by consequence, more civilian
casualties could be expected. However, is it in fact the responsibility of the United States to prevent this
possibility if it would result in less of a threat on the homeland in the short-term? The worry in this scenario
is that while in the short-term the United States might be safer, these factions could build and grow more
powerful and pose an even greater threat to the US in the future.

The United States, having already begun to reduce the amount of US military personnel overseas
due to the sequester, is not logically or reasonably safe from further threats of terror simply via the act of
implementing this reduction. While US military continues to convey an unwanted presence in foreign
nations, in regard to civilian attitudes, there are also insurgents remaining who dissent and fight to protest
the occupation of their land. Completely removing military and abandoning bases in these areas could
significantly reduce the threat of terrorism and future hostility from those specific regions. However, this
strategy would certainly be counterproductive and dangerous for the apparent US long-term foreign policy perspective. The complete removal of troops would require giving up the strategic locations used for acquiring Intel, which allow for prompt and efficient checks on threatening nation-states and radical groups, and leaving the area more susceptible to instability (United States Department of Defense 2012: 5). The loss of such strategic base locations, the majority of which are located in countries and states with large terrorist support, would result in gaps in both surveillance and human intelligence. These information deficiencies as discussed by Michael Hayden in regards to 9/11, resulting in gaps between intelligence agencies such as the NSA, FBI, and CIA result in a greater likelihood that terrorist organizations are successful in their ploys (Schmitt and Shanker 2011: 26-7).

The Watson Institute of International Studies at Brown University (2011) maintains that withholding facts about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan leads to much misconstrued information given to the American public. It is suggested that for better efficiency in future conflicts, the United States needs to be transparent about the human, social, and financial costs of war in the areas affected by the wars. The Watson Institute recommends that since the use of force has hindered the ability to use diplomatic deliberation and decision-making more effectively, releasing information on the deaths and injuries in all aspects of the war zones as well as tracking war-related post-deployment deaths would benefit US foreign policy on the whole. Economically, to limit defense spending, the Watson Institute asserts the Pentagon should strive to meet the same standards of accounting that other branches of the US government are required to meet. This includes making publicly available figures such as war costs, as well as auditing the use of private contractors and investigating profiteering and assessing the usefulness of the budget and where funds may be more usefully allocated. Engaging these recommendations could benefit future strategies for response to terrorism through the non-repetition of similar mistakes, rather than hastily reacting and losing billions of dollars over a ten-year period (The Watson Institute 2011). The National Commission on Terrorism suggests that the United States strengthen their efforts to deter any and all state support for terrorism through convincing these nations to refuse to tolerate the presence of these groups and administering efforts to deter them from training, recruiting, and raising funds while hiding behind the safety of political refuge.

Ultimately two choices become exceedingly prominent: to withdraw troops from areas of occupied radicals or to allow them to remain. Both choices carry merit, especially in the arguments for saving lives of civilians and US military alike. Removing all US presence will have positive short term effects as thousands of troops will be put out of harm’s way, but it is hard to believe that terrorism will decrease in the long-term solely due to a withdrawal of US troops from lands occupied by suspected terrorists. In the case of terrorism and national security, simply acknowledging the mistakes of the past by commissioning opposite strategies appears to be among the less viable options in terms of US strategy.

Terrorist groups will continue to evolve as the technological and political world changes. Forfeiture of a foothold right in the heart of their operations, where they can be watched and observed, appears to be of detriment to the United States. No matter if the US stays or goes, terrorist groups will still exist and carry on as they always have. Even if Al Qaeda were completely destroyed another terrorist group would take its place. There is no absolutely eradicating the recruitment and radicalization of terrorists, but attacks on US soil can be limited if not fully halted. The mistake now would be to back out in the form of an apology to terrorist groups to stop them from attacking. The damage has been done. The terms have been set. The US is not going anywhere.
References


