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Osama bin Laden's legacy

# Why Biden Might not be Able to Extricate the US from its Middle East Quagmire

The Economics of Overextension

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**Biden has promised an end to the endless wars. But such promises are not easy to keep. [This is the first of two articles on the legacy of Osama bin Laden.]**

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Next September, when the last C-130 cargo aircraft and Chinook transport helicopters take off from the infamous Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan that has doubled as a CIA torture center for suspected jihadists, they will not only be leaving behind the site of a military defeat. Their departure will also mark the dismal end of a strategy of direct military engagement to drastically reshape the Middle East that resulted instead in upending the global strategic balance.

America's 20-year-long war in the Middle East contributed decisively not only to degrading U.S. imperial power but also to the domestic polarization savaging the American political process at present and to the emergence of China as the new center of global capital accumulation. Ending the Afghanistan commitment, liberals and progressives hope, will provide the conditions for a fundamental reset of US foreign policy

But even now, many are skeptical that the United States has really learned its lesson and that Joe Biden will not find another excuse to maintain a military contingent in Afghanistan.

In a United States that has gone through the trauma of COVID-19, followed by the January 6 insurrection and a pandemic of almost weekly mass shootings, Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush, 9/11, and the War on Terror might seem to be historical footnotes that pale before the country's present troubles. But these now seemingly distant personalities and events had a decisive role in shaping the present.

## **Osama's Vision, Bush's Opportunity**

As I wrote in the aftermath of 9/11, Osama bin Laden operated with something like Che Guevara's "foco theory." Guevara believed that direct engagement of the enemy was necessary to show peasants that guerrillas could defeat the military and encourage them to join the revolution. Bin Laden, operating on a global stage, saw the September 11 events as an act that would expose the vulnerability of the Great Satan and inspire Muslims to join his jihad against it.

It did not quite work out that way. Instead of being inspired, most Muslims were horrified and distanced themselves from the terrible deed. Still bin Laden lucked out, thanks to George W. Bush and the neoconservatives that had come to power with him in Washington in 2001. For them, Osama's attack was a god-given opportunity to teach both America's enemies and friends that the empire was omnipotent. Ostensibly waged to go after the "roots of terror," the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were in fact what the Romans called "exemplary wars," and their aim was to reshape the global strategic environment to fit Washington's so-called "unipolar" status following the demise of the Soviet Union.

Disappointed with his father's reluctance to finish off Saddam Hussein during the 1990-91 Gulf War, George W. Bush initiated these invasions as the first steps in a demarche that would eliminate the so-called rogue states, compel greater loyalty from dependent states or supplant them with stronger allies, and put strategic competitors like China on notice that they should not even think of vying with the United States.

Disregarding the lessons of Vietnam and the British and Soviet debacles in Afghanistan, the Bush administration drove the United States into two unwinnable wars against highly motivated insurgents in the Middle East as bin Laden watched with satisfaction, living unperturbed under the protection of an American ally, the Pakistani military, in the peaceful garrison town of Abbottabad in Pakistan. It was not exactly the scenario he had envisaged, but he was not about to quibble if the Bush administration, owing to its drive for unipolar hegemony, placed the United States on the road to overextension, which was, after all, his strategic aim.

Prolonged occupation demanded boots on the ground, and as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage saw it, "The Army, in particular, [is] stretched too thin...fighting three wars—Afghanistan still, Iraq, and the global war on terrorism." At the height of the Iraq War, defense analyst James Fallows wrote, it was "only a slight exaggeration to say that today the entire U.S. military is either in Iraq, returning from Iraq, or getting ready to go." Most of the Army's maneuverable brigades were overseas, and those left in the United States were too few to maintain the contingency reserve or the training base necessary. Even the famed Special Forces were degraded, with their actual numbers in the field coming to hundreds at the most. Lack of human resources led the high command to call on the Reserves and the National Guard. As might be expected, morale plummeted, especially as tours of duty were extended and casualties mounted in lands to which these part-time soldiers had never expected to be assigned.

And as the prospect of prevailing in the battlefield became more and more distant, public support for the Iraq and Afghanistan expeditions, which was very limited right from the start, went up in smoke.

## **Obama Extends Bush II's Wars**

Barack Obama came to power in 2009 promising an end to the Middle East wars. In Iraq, the bulk of U.S. forces were withdrawn during his first term, but thousands of marines and Special Forces

personnel were reintroduced to fight against the Islamic State whose growth had been provoked by the U.S. presence in the Middle East. Even as this was happening, what had been a key U.S. objective in Iraq—a stable non-sectarian pro-U.S. state—collapsed as the Iraqi Shiite government aligned itself with Iran, against whom the United States was colluding with the Israelis in a high-tech effort to sabotage Tehran’s nuclear program.

Obama also began an open-ended intervention in the Syrian Civil War, deploying Special Forces and airstrikes that eventually enmeshed the United States in a multi-cornered confrontation with the Islamic State and other jihadists, Syrian forces, and Russian troops. The Democratic president, ironically a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, in fact expanded the U.S. military reach to North Africa during the Arab Spring in 2011, unilaterally enforcing with its NATO allies a “no fly zone” featuring attacks on Libyan defenses that resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths and massive air support of the ground campaigns of anti-Qaddafi rebels. The intervention left Libya with no centralized government, and the country lapsed into an anarchy that persists until the present.

In Afghanistan, Obama added 33,000 troops to the 68,000 already in the country when he came to office, thinking this “surge” would cripple the Taliban. This surge failed, but he maintained 8,400 troops in the country. In fact, Obama expanded the war to Pakistan, using drones to target Taliban leaders and jihadists operating from bases near the border with Afghanistan; this computer-managed war took the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians that the military termed “collateral damage.” He also sent Special Forces on raids deep into Pakistan, the most prominent example being the one to Abbotabad that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011.

In contrast to Bush II, who preferred “boots on the ground,” Obama, as the New York Times’ David Sanger, put it, embraced “hard, covert power, “alluding to the necessity of a “‘light footprint’ that enables [the United States] to fight its wars stealthily, execute its operations with the speed of the bin Laden raid, and then avoid lengthy entanglements.” Like Bush II, who had never experienced war firsthand, Obama brought to his brand of war-making an “aggressiveness” that people around him found “surprising.”

Obama, though, did appreciate the fact that being bogged down in the Middle East was sapping U.S. power by provoking disaffection at home and alienation from America abroad. Fighting so-called “asymmetric warfare” with irregulars like the Taliban and the jihadists could go on forever, and Obama wanted to shift the global U.S. military strategy to one that was more congenial to its perceived strength in conventional warfare instead of counterinsurgency. The grand new design was the “Pivot to Asia” that involved the deployment of the bulk of the U.S. naval strength to the Indo-Pacific area to contain China. Reorientation was easier said than done, however, as extrication from the Middle East morass was made impossible by the strength of interests that made up the War on Terror/Counterinsurgency lobby.

## **Obama’s Wars Become Trump’s**

Donald Trump rode to power partly on the strength of anti-war sentiment, continually reminding people during his campaign for the presidency in 2015 and 2016 that his rival Hillary Clinton had voted for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 when she was a senator. In office, however, he ended up destabilizing the Middle East even more. There was, first of all, his unqualified support for Israel, which led him to a major move that infuriated Arabs: the transfer of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Then he reversed the one tension-lessening achievement of Obama when he took the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal that had put effective checks on Tehran’s development of weapons-grade uranium in return for a relaxation of economic sanctions. Finally, he gave a blank

check for weapons purchases to Saudi Arabia, enabling the benighted kingdom to wage its cruel intervention in the civil war in Yemen.

Trump occasionally remembered, however, that eliminating boots on the ground was one of his major campaign promises, so that the country could focus on “America First.” But, as in the case of Bush II and Obama, both of whom had an inferiority complex when dealing with generals owing to their lack of combat experience, draft dodger Trump also deferred to the military. After he decided to end the Obama-era intervention in Syria by withdrawing 1,000 U.S. troops in early October 2019, he caved in to the military’s pushback. Over a month later, the head of the U.S. Central Command stated there was no “end date” on Washington’s intervention in Syria and the presence of 2,500 American troops in neighboring Iraq.

Like Obama, Trump was passive-aggressive, eager to show the generals that he could be as macho as they are. The most notorious display of this behavior was when he flagrantly disregarded international law and ordered the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, a top Iranian general, at Baghdad International Airport in January 2020, against the advice of the top brass and the intelligence elite.

Faced with passive resistance on the part of the generals, Trump ended up keeping thousands of troops in Afghanistan during his term in office, but, mindful of the consequences of not keeping his promise by the 2020 elections, he directed the military in February 2020 to withdraw all troops by November 2020. Again, the military procrastinated, with the support of the War on Terror lobby, the deadline passed, and Joe Biden inherited some 3,500 troops and Special Forces personnel still in the country when he took office in January 2021.

## **Will Trump’s Wars Becomes Biden’s Wars?**

Biden’s early rhetoric was reminiscent of both Obama’s and Trump’s initial seeming decisiveness about ending American’s Middle East engagements. Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” has been resurrected, identifying China more explicitly as a U.S. strategic rival. As the Defense Department puts it, China is the “DOD’s No. 1 pacing challenge, and it will develop operational concepts, capabilities and plans to bolster deterrence and maintain its competitive advantage. The approach toward China will be coordinated and synchronized across the enterprise to advance DOD’s priorities—integrated into domestic and foreign policy—in a whole-of-government strategy, strengthened by DOD’s alliances and partnerships and supported on a bipartisan basis in Congress.”

But that a continuing commitment to the Middle East is built into the Pentagon’s perspective is seen in the fact that after listing containment of China as its prime concern, it then lists as a priority the “disruption of transnational and non-state actor threats from violent extremist organizations—such as those operating in the Middle East, Africa and South and Central Asia.”

Indeed, that difficulty of ending these debilitating commitments was shown by the fact that Biden’s first act of war took place—guess where?—in Syria, where U.S. planes attacked Syrian militias slightly over a month after the new administration took office, on February 25.

## **Who Lost Afghanistan?**

If a sideshow like Syria is so difficult to wind up, it will be that much more difficult to end a major commitment like Afghanistan. As Biden’s self-imposed September deadline approaches, the War on Terror military/civilian lobby is going into overdrive to keep a U.S. presence there. The

congressionally chartered Afghan Study Group, co-chaired by retired Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has warned that “a precipitous withdrawal could lead to a reconstitution of the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland within eighteen months to three years.” Biden’s people must be anticipating with dread the blood curdling cry of “Who Lost Afghanistan?” that the opportunistic far right would raise in advance of the 2022 mid-term elections.

One characteristic of overextension is that it is infernally difficult to shed old priorities so that everything becomes a priority. Few have been the empires that have been able to unclench their fists and let go of self-destructive commitments. This is the reason why, despite Biden’s rhetoric of withdrawal, one cannot fault skeptics who predict that Biden, never known as a steely fellow but well known as a compromiser, will ultimately not have the stomach to defy the entrenched interests that are hell-bent on keeping a heavy American footprint in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

## **Walden Bello**

• Foreign Policy in Focus (FPiF). June 9, 2021:

<https://fpif.org/why-biden-might-not-be-able-to-extricate-the-us-from-its-middle-east-quagmire/>

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## **Part II - Osama’s Ghost: The Economics of Overextension**

**Twenty years of military quagmire of the Middle East has contributed to the fraying of the U.S. economy even as China has rapidly become the new center of global capital accumulation. This is the second of two articles on the legacy of Osama bin Laden.]**

The first part of our assessment of Washington’s 20 years of continuous war in the Middle East focused on its military and political costs. This part will discuss the economic consequences of this misadventure. Imperial overstretch, as historian Paul Kennedy points out, is not only a result of a mismatch between military goals and military resources but of the increasing inability of the economy to generate the resources to support a political and military strategy that might have seemed manageable when it began.

### **The Trillion Dollar War**

By the end of the Bush administration, the United States had spent nearly \$3 trillion on the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to the estimates of Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz. This was staggering. But as the wars were being pursued, the American public did not realize their true cost because the Bush administration chose to pay for the war via yearly emergency supplemental appropriations, which amounted, as analyst Doug Bandow put it, to a “pay-as-you-go” system.

Bush II avoided raising taxes to fund his wars since that was a surefire way of eliciting public opposition to these adventures. Indeed, he cut taxes on the rich. The preferred course of action was massive borrowing, a course that eventually added some \$1 trillion to the national debt. Afghanistan and Iraq were, in turn, part of a massive defense buildup, funded by debt, to achieve the unchallengeable hegemonic position the neoconservatives sought. Bush II’s defense budget averaged \$601 billion per year, compared to Pentagon spending of \$458 billion per year throughout the Cold War (1948-1990).

Americans began to feel the costs of the war toward the end of the decade as the economy weakened, then spiraled into recession following the global financial crisis in 2008, bringing to the surface the hard choices that had to be made in a condition of severe indebtedness. As Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz warned in 2008:

The long-term burden of paying for the conflicts will curtail the country's ability to tackle other urgent problems...Our vast and growing indebtedness inevitably makes it harder to afford new health-care plans, make large-scale repairs to crumbling roads and bridges, or build better-equipped schools. Already, the escalating cost of the wars has crowded out spending on virtually all other discretionary federal programs, including the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and federal aid to states and cities, all of which have been scaled back significantly since the invasion of Iraq.

But it was under the succeeding Obama administration that the full impact of the poisonous economic legacy of the Bush wars was felt. Rising concern over the massive debt—of which war-related debt was a central component—became a severe constraint in crafting a large enough stimulus program to enable the United States to surmount the recession triggered by the 2008 Wall Street implosion. The \$787 billion stimulus Obama got through Congress might have prevented the economic crisis from getting worse, but it was not enough to reignite the economy to overcome the 9 percent-plus unemployment that settled over the country during most of Obama's reign. Even as Obama batted down pleas by some of his advisers to raise the stimulus to \$1.5 trillion in order "to end the depression now," as Paul Krugman put it, he raised military spending. While Bush II's defense budgets averaged \$601 billion per year, Obama spent an average of \$687 billion annually between 2009 and 2014, provoking one libertarian analyst to comment acidly: "President Obama, who was elected during an economic crisis, will leave office having approved more military spending than any presidential administration in the nuclear era. Not too bad for a president who is often accused of trying to gut the military."

Disaffection with costly interventionist wars played a central role in getting Trump elected in 2016. By then, even as thousands of U.S. forces remained embedded throughout the Middle East and Southwest Asia engaged in the interminable War on Terror, the economic base to sustain Washington's costly military adventures was being eroded. Deindustrialization set in as U.S. transnational corporations shifted their manufacturing operations to China. Finance became the preferred investment area owing to high profits derived from it, leading to speculation becoming the driving force of the economy, and ending with the great Wall Street collapse of 2008.

### **America Pinned Down as China Takes Off**

The logic of financialization was ruining the U.S. economy even as rapid industrialization— with massive support from American TNCs transferring industrial processes to China to take advantage of labor that was 2.9 percent the cost of U.S. labor—was giving China's economy a solid foundation and spurring its global expansion, as it supplied manufactured goods to the United States and other markets while its need for raw material and food stimulated the economies of the global South. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019, China had become not only the world's second biggest economy. It had become the center of global capital accumulation or, in the popular image, the "locomotive of the world economy," accounting for 28 percent of all growth worldwide in the five years from 2013 to 2018, more than twice the share of the United States, according to the International Monetary Fund.

One key reason China prospered was because of its low spending on defense during its decades of



industrialization, a strategy that then-Chinese President Hu Jintao described as China's "peaceful rise" in the early 2000s. Although the 2002 Defense Department Strategy Paper identified China as the main U.S. strategic competitor, the Bush II administration's desire to get China behind its war on terror as an ally post 9/11 allayed Beijing's fears of U.S. military power being directed at it.

Neither was China overly worried about U.S. military power under Obama to push it to significantly raise military spending despite the vaunted "Pivot to Asia" of America's strategic posture. Beijing knew that the United States was far too enmeshed with China as a production site for its TNCs, a market for American high technology, and a source of cheap manufactured goods for American consumers for Washington to carry out a disruptive military containment strategy.

The strategy of China's "peaceful rise," which relegates military upgrading far behind economic modernization as a priority, has continued to reign up until the Xi Jinping era, though more militant rhetoric now accompanies China's responses to U.S. initiatives. Even now China has made little effort to close the spending gap with the Pentagon, with the latter devoting more than three times more than Beijing spends on defense. Reflecting this relatively relaxed view when it comes to military modernization, Xi told the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017 that China will not have a "world class military" -meaning one that is at par with the United States- until 2049.

Instead of being preoccupied with building up its military might, Beijing has focused on opening markets in Africa and Latin America and becoming a source of billions of dollars of development aid, even as bilateral U.S. economic aid has been neglected in favor of ever increasing military assistance and subsidized weapons sales to old allies like Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The launching of the Beijing-sponsored Asian Infrastructure Development Bank in 2014 saw even traditional U.S. allies in Europe queue up to become partners. More governments from both the global South and the global North signed up when Beijing rolled out the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that proposed to spend over \$4 trillion dollars for infrastructure projects to connect the Eurasian landmass, Africa, and Latin America.

When Trump came to power in 2017 and promoted the doctrine of "America First," Xi Jinping was quick to go to Davos to proclaim China's leadership of the globalization process. China was winning the diplomatic game even as Trump alienated old allies like Germany by carping that they were not carrying their fair share of the burden of defending them. For Trump, the answer to China was not to compete with Beijing in the diplomatic Olympics but to punish it economically with trade sanctions and an aggressive effort to change its state-led capitalist mode of production. Yet when it came to relating this aggressive economic strategy to the continuing priority of the War on Terror focused on the Middle East in the U.S. military agenda, incoherence ruled, as it did in most of Trump's foreign policy initiatives. America First or not, the War on Terror lobby was determined not to disengage from the Middle East.

With the new Biden administration, there has been hope in liberal circles that America's economic priorities are being reordered. Many of the thrusts of the \$6 trillion budget for FY 2021-2022 show promise in terms of addressing the country's dilapidated physical infrastructure and a social infrastructure marked by growing poverty and gross inequality. There is one area, however, that is more of the same: defense. Reflecting Biden's reluctance to displease the generals, the budget raises the resources devoted to the military from \$740 billion during Trump's last year in office to \$753 billion. A significant portion of the budget will go to supporting the military infrastructure that the Pentagon has built up over the last 20 years in waging its War on Terror in the Middle East and elsewhere.

## Osama's Ghost

Twenty years after 9/11, the United States may still be the premier global power, but it is a much diminished one. Osama bin Laden's outrageous action did not adhere to the Guevarist playbook of igniting a thousand Islamic fires, but it ended up achieving his strategic aim of bringing about U.S. overextension by providing the opportunity for Bush and the neoconservatives to try to realize their equally implausible dream of achieving unchallengeable military supremacy globally. Once committed, U.S. troops were infernally difficult to withdraw, as Obama and Trump found out as they saw their priorities run up against a powerful military and political lobby with an interest in a continued U.S. presence in a region that has been a graveyard of empires.

Robert Gates served as secretary of defense to both George W. Bush and Barack Obama. He resigned shortly after Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011. In a speech to West Point cadets in September 2011, Gates paid a back-handed compliment to Osama, without of course mentioning him, while issuing a stinging criticism of the American leaders that took his bait and drove the United States to the Middle East quagmire from which it still has to extricate itself: "In my opinion, 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."

Twenty years since 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, the United States is still haunted by Osama's ghost.

### **Walden Bello**

- Foreign Policy in Focus (FPIF). June 11, 2021:  
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### **P.S.**

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