



Why the United States Is Losing—And Russia and Iran Are Winning

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At a press conference in 2015, Barack Obama predicted that Russian intervention in Syria would end in ignominy and Moscow would be “stuck in a quagmire.”¹ Rather than repeat America’s own tough experience in recent Middle Eastern wars, however, the Russian operation helped Syrian president Bashar al-Assad seize the initiative and recapture Aleppo. Since the 9/11 attacks, major American wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya have all been strategic failures. During the same period, however, US rivals Russia and Iran achieved significant success during campaigns in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, and Iraq. Why does the United States lose, whereas Russia and Iran win?

The answer does not lie with military spending, given the dramatic US advantage in defense budgets. Instead, the explanation is cultural. War today is primarily civil war, and when states intervene in foreign internal conflicts, cultural factors are a stronger predictor of battlefield outcomes than material resources. That puts the United States at a disadvantage for three reasons. First, America’s idealistic domestic culture encourages a crusading vision of war and unrealistic goals, whereas Russia’s and Iran’s domestic cultures spur a more pragmatic approach. Second, US military culture prioritizes conventional interstate war over intervention in foreign internal conflicts, whereas Russia and Iran have a broader view of the military’s mission. Third, Washington often intervenes in distant countries where there is a chasm between American culture and the target state’s culture, while Russia

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and Iran usually intervene in nearby countries where they enjoy extensive social, religious, and economic networks.

Modern Warfare

Culture, rather than power, is central in shaping success in modern war

After 1945, the nature of global conflict shifted from interstate war to civil war. In this new era, the United States endured a grim sequence of military stalemates and failures, from Vietnam to Afghanistan. However, outside intervention in foreign internal conflicts is not doomed to fail. Since the 9/11 attacks, both Russia and Iran achieved considerable strategic success when meddling in foreign civil wars. The divergent experiences of America, Russia, and Iran reveal the central importance of culture—rather than power—in shaping success in modern war.

The Age of Civil Wars

The contemporary conflict environment is dominated by internationalized civil wars. Historian David Armitage described how, in recent decades, civil war has become “the most widespread, the most destructive, and the most characteristic form of organized human violence.”² After 1945, a combination of nuclear deterrence, democratization, trade, and international institutions suppressed the number of interstate wars.³ However, the drivers of internal conflict, such as poverty, remained prevalent, and the number of civil wars increased sharply in the 1960s and 1970s, surged again after the end of the Cold War, declined somewhat in the late 1990s, and ticked upward once more after the 2011 Arab Spring.⁴ As a result, around 9 in 10 conflicts in the post-Cold War era are civil wars, including prominent wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and Ukraine.⁵

Today, foreign meddling in civil wars is ubiquitous, either directly through the deployment of troops or air power, or indirectly through the provision of material aid to local groups (proxy warfare).⁶ In 2019, external states intervened with troops in 22 out of 52 intrastate wars around the world—the highest number of direct interventions since World War II.⁷ Meanwhile, indirect support to civil war participants, such as the supply of weaponry, is even more common. During the last two centuries, the odds that a rebel group would receive outside aid rose from around 20 percent to nearly 80 percent.⁸ And the heightened cost of interstate war encourages states to pursue alternative means of destabilizing opponents, such as backing rebels.⁹

American Quagmire

The era of internationalized civil wars since 1945 has also been an age of American military failure. If we define victory in terms of achieving core political aims with a favorable ratio of costs and benefits, the United States won almost every major war before 1945, but only achieved a single clear-cut success after 1945—the 1991 Gulf War.¹⁰

To illustrate this tough experience, we can focus on Washington’s three major interventions with ground or air forces since the 9/11 attacks: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.

In 2001, the United States intervened decisively in the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan, employing a combination of US airpower and small numbers of Special Forces, in cooperation with local allies, to rout the Taliban, which fled south toward the Pakistan border. The Taliban, however, recovered

in sanctuaries in Pakistan, and the conflict became stalemated. In 2019, the *Washington Post* published the “Afghanistan Papers,” an internal US government review of the conflict, which described a campaign marred by mismanagement, corruption, overambition, and often changing goals.¹¹ Earlier this year, President Biden announced that US troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan before September 11, 2021. In August, the Taliban launched a lightning advance, swept across Afghanistan, and captured Kabul. After two decades of fighting, over 2,300 US fatalities, tens of thousands of Afghan soldiers and civilians killed, and the expenditure of over US\$900 billion dollars, the war was a major American failure.¹²

The Iraq War proved to be even costlier, with 4,500 American soldiers killed and between one and two trillion US dollars expended.¹³ In 2003, US-led regime change in Iraq triggered a wave of looting, violence, and ultimately full-scale civil war. The “surge” strategy in 2007, with increased US troop levels and outreach to Sunni insurgents, suppressed the fighting, but Iraq remained extremely fragile when US combat forces withdrew in late 2011. Three years later, ISIS rebels invaded northern Iraq, routing Iraqi government forces, and Washington sent 3,000 soldiers back to the country.¹⁴ A recent two-volume history of the Iraq War produced by the Army War College described the “failure of the United States to attain its strategic objectives” and concluded that “the human and material cost of the conflict was staggering.”¹⁵

In the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011, an armed rebellion began against Muammar Qaddafi’s regime in Libya. Washington joined an international coalition to avert the growing humanitarian crisis, and the objectives quickly broadened to toppling Qaddafi. Following regime change, Libya collapsed into

The US won almost every major war before 1945 but only succeeded in the 1991 Gulf War after

chaos as rival militias competed for power. According to the World Bank, Libyan GDP fell by around two-thirds from 2012 to 2016.¹⁶ Obama said that “failing to plan for the day after” in Libya was the “worst mistake” of his presidency.¹⁷

Russian and Iranian Successes

Meanwhile, during the last two decades, Russia and Iran have enjoyed far greater success intervening in foreign civil wars. Moscow is seeking to reestablish a sphere of influence in its periphery, oppose the Western-led global order, resist “color revolutions” such as Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 (which are viewed as Western-imposed regime change), and disprove Obama’s assertion that Russia is merely a “regional power” that acts “out of weakness.”¹⁸

Since 9/11, Russia has launched three major interventions in foreign internal conflicts. In 2008, Moscow engaged in a five-day campaign to prevent Georgia from reasserting control over the separatist republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia achieved rapid battlefield success, strengthened its influence in the disputed republics (which Moscow recognized as independent states), and effectively ended Georgia’s near-term prospects of joining NATO. Meanwhile, there were few international costs. The following year, Obama wiped the slate clean by signaling a “reset” in relations with Russia.¹⁹

In 2014, following mass protests, the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich fell from power and fled the country. Moscow responded by sending troops and material support to separatist rebels in Eastern Ukraine and annexing Crimea. The balance sheet of gains and losses from Russian intervention in Ukraine is far from straightforward, and the political consequences are yet to be fully realized. Putin’s actions hardened anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine, and the United States and European Union imposed sanctions on Russia. Still, Russia seized strategic territory in the Crimea and secured its Black Sea naval base at Sevastopol at minimal material cost. Russian influence over separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine has also provided Moscow with significant leverage over the political future of Ukraine.

The following year, in the summer of 2015, Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria was teetering in the face of a four-year-long rebellion. To save his ally and the only Russian military base outside the former USSR (in Tartus), Putin deployed air and ground capabilities to Syria and launched dozens of daily air strikes, ostensibly against ISIS but more often against other Syrian rebel groups. Russian intervention helped to turn the war around and hand the military initiative to al-Assad. In 2016, US operations against ISIS cost over US\$11 million per day, whereas the Russian air campaign in Syria cost one-third, or less, of this amount.²⁰ Moscow pivoted to the role of peacemaker and began to cooperate closely with Turkey. Putin became a steadily less isolated figure at G20 meetings,

symbolized in 2018 by his “high five” with Saudi crown prince Mohammad Bin Salman.²¹

Iran also reaped far greater dividends than the United States from intervention in foreign civil wars. Tehran’s core goals include deterring perceived threats from the United States, Israel, and Sunni rivals like Saudi Arabia; warding off foreign meddling inside Iran (with memories of US involvement in the toppling of Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953); and expanding Iranian sway by protecting a political corridor of influence westward through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and an economic corridor eastward through Central Asia.²² The most significant Iranian interventions since 9/11 were in Iraq and Syria, and both resulted in strategic success.

After US forces invaded Iraq in 2003, Iran became the most influential outside actor in Iraq. Tehran trained and supplied Iraqi militias that battled rival groups as well as US troops.²³ In 2014, Tehran deployed Special Forces and air power and organized Shiite militias known as “Popular Mobilization Forces” to check the advance of ISIS into northern Iraq. With allies in the Iraqi parliament, Tehran held an effective veto over the choice of Iraqi prime minister. Overall, with a helping hand from the United States, Iraq was transformed from Iran’s nemesis to its client state. As a former Iraqi finance minister put it in 2017, “Iranian influence is dominant.”²⁴

When Syria collapsed into civil war in 2011, Tehran provided limited assistance to its only longstanding Arab state ally, including riot control equipment, financial aid, and advisors. As the rebels gained the upper hand, Iran escalated its support, mobilizing Hezbollah fighters, Shiite volunteers (from as far afield as Afghanistan), Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and regular Iranian armed forces.²⁵ The cost of Iran’s intervention in Syria was significant, including hundreds of Iranian fatalities, the expenditure of over US\$15 billion, and heightened tensions with the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.²⁶ The pay-off, however, was also substantial: maintaining al-Assad in power and protecting the keystone in Iran’s land bridge to the Mediterranean. A 2019 report from the International Institute for Strategic Studies concluded that Iran had emerged from the wars in Iraq and Syria, “better placed than any other [country] with the possible exception of Russia.”²⁷

Reasons for Divergent Outcomes

Why has the United States struggled on the battlefield of foreign civil war relative to Russia and Iran? The answer is not a deficiency of power. In 2018, US defense expenditures were US\$649 billion, versus US\$61.4 billion for Russia and US\$13.2 billion for Iran.²⁸ In dollar terms, the US economy is around

fifteen times bigger than that of Russia and nearly 50 times bigger than that of Iran.²⁹

Instead, the fundamental reason for divergent outcomes is strategic culture, or distinctive patterns of social relations, beliefs, and values that are learned and acquired in a society and relate to the practice of war.³⁰ Three cultural dynamics hand Russia and Iran a significant edge: domestic culture, military culture, and the cultural gap between the intervenor and the target state.

Domestic Culture

A core element of US national identity is the founding creed of individual rights and democracy, which Americans sometimes assume is universally desired, or as US founding father Alexander Hamilton put it, inscribed in the heavens by the hand of God.³¹ American idealism is a powerful asset—a source of soft power that

Idealism can encourage Washington to set grandiose and unrealistic war aims

inspires the US public to fight and attracts allies around the world. When the United States intervenes in foreign civil wars, however, idealism can also encourage Washington to set grandiose and unrealistic war aims to refashion the target society into a beacon of freedom. US officials may assume that tyranny represses a natural love of liberty and that the removal of a dictator will enable democracy to flourish.

The US goal in Afghanistan was to establish “a self-sustaining, moderate, and democratic Afghan government able to independently exercise its sovereign authority throughout Afghanistan.”³² But the creation of a stable liberal democracy, even over the course of a generation, was implausible, given that Afghanistan in 2001 had been ruined by decades of war and had a lower literacy rate than America in the 1600s.³³ In Iraq, the goal was even more audacious, as President Bush put it: “A free, democratic, peaceful Iraq will not threaten America or our friends ... [and] ... can set a hopeful example to the entire region and lead other nations to choose freedom.”³⁴ The Obama administration was careful to outline more limited goals in Libya. Nevertheless, during the war, US objectives broadened from protecting civilians to ousting the Qaddafi regime, and Obama envisioned “an inclusive and tolerant and democratic Libya that stands as the ultimate rebuke to Qaddafi’s leadership.”³⁵

Idealism can also encourage a binary view of the campaign as good against evil, making it difficult to negotiate with enemies and cut the kind of pragmatic deals that may be necessary to achieve partial success in a complex foreign conflict. In Afghanistan, the United States initially refused to distinguish between Al Qaeda

and the Taliban, even though Al Qaeda seeks an international caliphate, whereas the Taliban's goals are mainly limited to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Washington only began negotiating with the Taliban in 2011—a decade after the war began.³⁶ In Iraq, US officials also initially resisted talking to insurgents. When Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz received a memo suggesting outreach to Sunni rebels, he reportedly wrote in the margin, “They are Nazis!”³⁷

By contrast, Russian and Iranian national identities do not prioritize the liberal creed, human rights, or democracy. This may diminish their soft power, but it also allows for a pragmatic—if sometimes brutal—posture that can maximize the return on investment in foreign internal conflicts. Russia's goals in wartime are typically illiberal, narrow, and realistic. Rather than pursue Western-style nation-building, Moscow seeks a favorable political order that protects its “red lines” such as keeping countries in its immediate periphery out of NATO and the European Union. Notably, Moscow is the only major player in the Middle East that talks to everyone: Israel, Egypt, Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Hezbollah, as well as the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds.

Moscow's intervention in Georgia was a narrow and calculated operation to punish Tbilisi and strengthen Russian territorial control. Having won a clear battlefield victory, Moscow withdrew its forces back to the disputed territories and did not expand its objectives. Similarly, Russia's deployment in Syria was a limited operation to prop up al-Assad's regime, test military technology, and gain international status. Having largely achieved these aims, in 2016, Moscow announced a partial withdrawal.³⁸ These kinds of narrowly defined missions might seem anathema to Americans who view war in terms of good versus evil.

Iran's aims have also generally been pragmatic rather than crusading. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Tehran was tempted by a missionary foreign policy to “overthrow all treacherous, corrupt, oppressive, and criminal regimes,” as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini put it.³⁹ But like many revolutionary states, Iran quickly adapted to the international system. After the US invasion of Iraq, for example, Tehran never sought to turn Iraq into a theocracy, aware of the certainty of resistance from Iraq's Sunni and Kurdish populations as well as Shiite clerics. Iran also aided a wide range of foreign militias, from Shiite groups such as the Badr Corps and the Mahdi Army, to Sunni jihadist groups like Ansar al-Islam and al-Qaida in Iraq.⁴⁰ In Afghanistan, Iran engaged with Kabul and sought to play a key role in peace talks, while also building ties to its former adversary, the Taliban. Today, Iran is an increasingly influential player in western Afghanistan, especially around Herat or “Little Iran.”⁴¹

In summary, America's ideological culture spurs a crusading spirit in wartime. A righteous view of military campaigns can be dangerous in interstate war, for example, making it hard to pursue any outcome short of the enemy's unconditional surrender. But American idealism is even more perilous when the

United States wades into foreign civil wars because it encourages impossible goals, imposes a highly simplified model on a complex struggle, and prevents the kind of practical deal-making that is essential in a conflict that—as we shall see—Americans may barely understand. Russia and Iran are much weaker than the United States, but this has the advantage of producing a more clear-eyed view of what is attainable in war.

Military Culture

US military culture favors planning and preparation for conventional interstate war over intervention in foreign internal conflicts—hamstringing US battlefield performance in an era of civil wars. Despite a long history of fighting irregular enemies, the US military traditionally sees its mission as defeating enemy states and views counterinsurgency or nation-building as peripheral activities—describing them as “other than war,” “short of war,” or “post-war.”⁴² In the wake of Vietnam, for instance, the US Army deliberately spurned training for guerrilla warfare, in favor of preparing for an interstate war with the Soviets in Europe.⁴³ Scholar of geopolitics Colin Gray wrote that the American way of war is “profoundly regular.”⁴⁴

The experience of sustained counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan spurred greater attention to irregular war and led to the rise of counter-insurgency experts, or “COINdinistas,” like David Petraeus.⁴⁵ During the last decade, however, the US military has pivoted back to its comfort zone of preparing for interstate war. In 2012, the Pentagon announced that US forces “will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.”⁴⁶ The Pentagon’s 2020 budget request claimed that years of counter-insurgency had eroded US military readiness, and Washington would henceforth “re-focus on high-intensity conflict to compete against Great Powers.”⁴⁷

US civilian leaders often share the military’s skepticism about stabilization missions and counterinsurgency. Indeed, one of the few things that unites the contemporary American left and right is wariness about “nation-building.” During the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush described Bill Clinton’s deployment of American soldiers in peacekeeping missions as liberal do-goodery: “I’m worried about an opponent who uses ‘nation-building’ and ‘the military’ in the same sentence.”⁴⁸ In 2012, Barack Obama declared, “it’s time to do some nation-building here at home.”⁴⁹ In 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the United States would prioritize the defeat of ISIS but stressed, “we are not in the business of nation-building or reconstruction.”⁵⁰

America’s conventional war mindset has eroded US battlefield performance by limiting training for nation-building and counterinsurgency and preventing the military from institutionalizing the lessons learned from prior unconventional

campaigns. The marginalization of unconventional war after Vietnam, in the words of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, “left the services unprepared to deal with the operations that followed: Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq—the consequences and costs of which we are still struggling with today.”⁵¹

There is a tension between America’s idealistic goals in war and its aversion to nation-building because US aims are often out of sync with the degree of commitment. American leaders aim to build a beacon of freedom and leave as soon as possible. The preference for interstate war encourages wishful thinking that wars can be quickly won through high-technology weaponry and that stabilization operations can somehow be avoided. In 2002, even as American leaders cast the Afghanistan mission in moral terms, just 10,000 US troops were deployed in the country on a narrow counter-terrorism operation, while 5,000 international soldiers struggled to provide a modicum of stability. George W. Bush recalled that in Afghanistan, “our desire to maintain a light military footprint left us short of the resources we needed.”⁵² Similarly, the United States invaded Iraq with too few troops to stabilize the country, and American soldiers were not trained or equipped to preserve order or prevent looting.⁵³ After the intervention in Libya, Obama claimed, “we [and] our European partners underestimated the need to come in full force if you’re going to do this ... there has to be a much more aggressive effort to rebuild societies that didn’t have any civic traditions.”⁵⁴

Preference for interstate war encourages wishful thinking that stabilization operations can be avoided

Military culture in Russia and Iran is more comfortable with intervention in foreign civil wars as a core mission. Moscow portrays the West as being engaged in a systematic destabilization campaign against its rivals, and therefore any Russian meddling in foreign internal conflicts is a necessary defensive measure. In 2013, the Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov contended that the United States and its allies employed gray-zone warfare to weaken a target internally and achieve regime change, from intervention in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s through the color revolutions and the Arab Spring. The lines between war and peace had blurred, and future wars would involve a four-to-one ratio of non-military to military actions. Russia needed to counter asymmetric threats with a whole-of-government approach to warfare, fusing together elements of hard and soft power.⁵⁵

Russia has employed a hybrid mixture of conventional and unconventional tactics to exploit domestic fissures in other countries. Moscow created or exacerbated “frozen conflicts” within the former Soviet Union by backing separatist

territories and preventing countries from moving into the Western orbit—such as Transnistria in Moldova, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and the so-called “people’s republics” of Luhansk and Donetsk in Ukraine. Russia used a wide range of tactics—such as cultural and linguistic support, propaganda, economic pressure, and diplomacy—in addition to military force. Moscow mobilized a diverse coalition of allies, including Cossacks, mercenaries, biker gangs, Russian-sponsored NGOs, cyber warriors, peacekeepers, and local proxies.⁵⁶ The Kremlin also prioritized the development of rapidly deployable forces, such as *Spetsnaz* or “special designation” units and Special Forces, to train proxy actors in foreign internal conflicts and “support Russian propaganda campaigns aimed at creating divisions between civilians and their governments.”⁵⁷ In 2014, for example, Moscow used *Spetsnaz* to engage in subversion and arm separatists in Ukraine and seize Crimea.

The contrast in strategic culture is even starker between the United States and Iran. In the wake of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, Tehran concluded it should avoid interstate war and declined to develop a capable conventional military.⁵⁸ Instead, the Iranian way of war prioritizes the manipulation of foreign civil wars through military, financial, and informational support to both state and non-state actors. Tehran integrated Iranian officers into popular militias in Iraq and Syria and built a specialized expeditionary capability for internal conflict, the Quds Force, with an estimated 15,000 fighters.⁵⁹ In 2019, a representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader said, “Today, Iran is also the Popular Mobilization Forces of Iraq, Lebanon’s Hezbollah, Ansarullah in Yemen, Syria’s National Front, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.”⁶⁰

The Iranian way of war has enabled Tehran to punch above its weight. Proxy conflicts facilitated covert Iranian deployments with plausible deniability and an

economy of force, expanding Iran’s strategic reach, deterring adversaries, and compensating for conventional weakness.⁶¹ One study concluded, “In the 21st century, no state has had more success in utilizing militant clients outside its borders toward strategic ends than the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁶²

In summary, the American cultural bias toward high-intensity interstate war is dangerous in a world of civil wars because it encourages the US military to prepare for the kind of wars it prefers to fight rather than

the kind of wars that it does and will fight. It also produces wishful thinking that highly kinetic operations, or a small-footprint invasion force, can remove the bad guys without the need for stabilization operations. However, there is

The American cultural bias toward high-intensity interstate war is dangerous in a world of civil wars

little point in toppling a tyrant if the result is chaos. By contrast, Tehran's way of war emphasizes the manipulation of internal conflicts and cuts with the grain of modern war.

Cultural Gap

When Washington seizes the sword, there is often a cultural gulf between the United States and the target country. As US power grew after 1945, Washington fought far from home, spurring “alien wars” wherein Americans did not comprehend the local languages, ethnic politics, and traditions. In his memoirs, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld described US ignorance about Afghanistan in 2001: “In some cases our analysts were working with decades-old British maps ... few intelligence operatives and analysts spoke the Afghan languages.”⁶³ Ambassador Douglas Lute, the White House's Afghan War “czar” from 2007 to 2013, concluded that “we were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan—we didn't know what we were doing.”⁶⁴

It was a similar tale of ignorance in Iraq, where Washington's inaccurate claims about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction were symptomatic of a deeper misunderstanding about the country. The US Army War College's history of the Iraq War claimed that the most significant problem with the invasion planning was, “the gaping holes in what the US military knew about Iraq.”⁶⁵ Years after the invasion, the cultural gulf remained vast. In 2006, there were around 1,000 US officials in the Baghdad embassy, but only six of them spoke Arabic fluently.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, in Libya, a British House of Commons report described how the coalition relied on “incomplete and inaccurate intelligence” and failed to understand regional complexities or the role of Islamist radicals in the Libyan rebellion.⁶⁷ Obama later admitted, “the degree of tribal division in Libya was greater than our analysts had expected.”⁶⁸

The culture gap encouraged US officials to lump adversaries together into overly broad categories such as labeling Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “axis of evil” despite the lack of any real coordination between these states. Ignorance also led US officials to make flawed assumptions about how these wars would unfold, for example, believing that American troops in Iraq would be greeted as liberators, or that oil revenues would finance postwar reconstruction in Libya.⁶⁹ A senior US official concluded that “we didn't have a clue” about the situation in Benghazi, and Washington's response was “we'll figure it out as we go.”⁷⁰

For the individual American soldier, Iraq and Afghanistan could be a bewildering experience. Aaron MacLean led a Marine infantry platoon in Afghanistan and described how Washington tried to replace an unwritten Afghan

Russia and Iran are much weaker than the US, but military operations are usually closer to home

constitution that Americans did not even understand. “It consisted of traditional ethnic, tribal, state and religious patterns, all of which had been partially transformed by modernization and traumatically stressed by decades of war and the rise of Islamic radicalism.”⁷¹ Meanwhile, for the local people, the American intervenor was the alien. US soldiers could look as terrifying as the Martian invaders in H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*, provoking local, ethnic, or nationalist resistance.

By contrast, US rivals intervened in more culturally familiar environments. Russia and Iran are much weaker than the United States, but this means that military operations usually occur closer to home. Meanwhile, Russia and Iran lie at the heart of Eurasia:

the United States only borders Canada and Mexico, whereas Russia borders fourteen countries and Iran borders seven. Geography provides endless strategic headaches for Russia and Iran, but it also spurs extensive regional networks.

Russian interventions in Ukraine and Georgia occurred in former Soviet states and major trading partners. Ukraine, for example, has a large ethnic Russian population (17 percent of the total), and Russian intelligence has a significant presence within the Ukrainian police and intelligence services.⁷² The Russian intervention in Syria is exceptional, as it is the first time that Moscow deployed forces outside its immediate sphere since the end of the Cold War. Still, Syria is Russia’s major partner in the region, and since the 1960s, Moscow has sent military aid to Damascus, provided scientists and engineers to develop the Syrian oil industry, and built a naval base at Tartus. Many Syrians learn Russian or travel in Russia, and in 2017, al-Assad’s children vacationed in Russian-controlled Crimea.⁷³

Iran also intervened in countries where it enjoys extensive political, economic, and social ties. Iran and southern Iraq are deeply intertwined; the populations share the same Shiite religion, and hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims visit the holy city of Najaf each year. Busloads of Iraqi militia recruits routinely cross the border into Iran for training. Iraq is also a major market for Iranian goods, even when sanctions shut down other foreign markets. Iranian exports to Iraq (excluding oil) nearly tripled from US\$2.3 billion in 2008 to US\$6.2 billion in 2015.⁷⁴

Iran has far-reaching networks in Syria. The regime in Damascus is dominated by the Alawite sect, which is an offshoot of Shiite Islam. During the 1980s, Iran opened a cultural center in Syria and increased its links to Syrian universities. Iran invested billions of dollars in Syrian businesses, ranging from mobile

telecommunications to banking. Hundreds of thousands of Iranians have visited Syria on religious pilgrimages. The two countries have long been allies. Damascus backed Iran in the Iran-Iraq War, and in 2006, Iran and Syria signed a military cooperation pact.

In summary, cultural knowledge is often vital to the success of interventions in foreign civil wars. In interstate wars, a stronger power may be able to defeat a weaker power even if the stronger power is ignorant about its enemy's culture. In World War II, for example, Washington had little comprehension of Japanese culture, but US forces nevertheless crushed the Japanese military using material strength, logistics, and high technology. However, when meddling in foreign internal conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan, power is far from sufficient to guarantee victory, and cultural ignorance can be deadly. Here, outside actors compete for the loyalty of the local people, and Washington may understand the population less well than the enemy insurgents. In recent wars, the United States waded into the most alien environments imaginable, US officials misunderstood the nature of the struggle, and American soldiers stumbled in unfamiliar terrain. By contrast, Russia and Iran intervened in more familiar environments and achieved greater success. In civil wars, knowledge trumps power.

Power is far from sufficient to guarantee victory, and cultural ignorance can be deadly

What's a Robust Military Good for Today?

After 9/11, the United States constructed the best trained and equipped military in the history of warfare—but it has kept losing wars. By contrast, Russian and Iranian military spending has been far more modest, and yet their interventions have largely succeeded. The United States has achieved some gains in the ongoing campaign against ISIS, but here, of course, Washington effectively fought on the same side as Russia and Iran. American national culture encourages idealistic and sometimes unrealistic goals, US military culture neglects nation-building and counterinsurgency, and there is often a cultural chasm between the United States and the target country that creates ignorance on both strategic and tactical levels.

Americans tend to see war and peace as opposites. War is a distinct project with a clear start and end point. Washington should quickly achieve grandiose goals, and then leave. By contrast, Russia and Iran tend to view war and peace as continuous. Foreign internal conflicts are not problems to be solved, but more like chronic health issues to be managed. Success is measured in

incremental gains over years or decades. Low-level frozen conflicts may be tolerated indefinitely, and Moscow and Tehran do not look to leave.

The solution is not for the United States to copy the Russian or Iranian ways of war. Foreign strategic cultures create their own problems. For example, Russia's campaign in Syria has reportedly killed thousands of civilians in indiscriminate attacks.⁷⁵ Abandoning US idealism would also be costly in terms of domestic and foreign support. Instead, the answer is to temper American moralism by aligning the ends and means of war and pursuing workable, if imperfect, outcomes—aiming for ugly stability rather than a beacon of freedom. The US military should broaden its conception of the soldier's core mission beyond conventional interstate war and prepare more effectively for a world of civil wars through, for example, greater cultural training. And most importantly, the United States should recognize that unmatched material strength can diminish battlefield effectiveness by tempting Washington into unwise adventures.

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