

September 9, 2011



After 9/11 Anniversary: The Return Of US Diplomacy

The US has relied on the military to hit back when attacked or even threatened; to place first priority on building up defenses; to sometimes shoot first, ask questions later. But the most difficult challenges ahead will require greater reliance on diplomacy and traditional statecraft.

By Nicholas Burns

Cambridge, Mass--America's 9/11 commemoration reminds us what an unusual decade it has been for the United States on the world stage.

During these last 10 years, the US has fought two major land wars simultaneously. It has conducted an aggressive, controversial, and dangerous military campaign against terrorist groups from Iraq to the Afghan/Pakistan border to Somalia and Yemen. And America has transformed the way it defends itself from the terrorist threat at home and overseas.

The US has relied on the military to hit back when attacked or even threatened, to place first priority on building up defenses, and to sometimes shoot first and ask questions later. Much of this made sense in the months immediately following the shocking new threat that appeared with such sudden and terrible force in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001.

Different challenges require different policies

But, the years ahead look to present far different challenges for America's global leadership role, requiring both a vastly changed mindset and dramatically different policies in Washington.

To be sure, we will sometimes turn to our extraordinarily impressive military to defend against threats new and old. But, unlike the years following 9/11, the most difficult challenges ahead will require greater reliance on a combination of diplomacy and traditional statecraft and all that comes with it. That includes negotiating with odious regimes, threatening and cajoling them – but more often overcoming them through the strength of our political alliances – to get our way in the world.

This return of diplomacy to center stage in American foreign policy will take many different forms.

First, diplomacy is ascendant in the costly, ill-defined, and inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that will end not on the battlefield but at the negotiating table. President Obama's decision to remove combat forces in Iraq and ask the State Department to lead at the end of this year is sensible and long overdue. The US will also need to negotiate its way out of Afghanistan in the next few years as a conventional military victory there is unattainable.

Second, diplomacy is also the most likely way for the US to blunt the nuclear ambitions of both North Korea and Iran. After the searing experience of invading and occupying both Afghanistan and Iraq, there is no appetite in Washington or in allied capitals for another land war in the vital regions of the Middle East and Asia. Instead, America will need to contain and eventually defeat the aims of the gangster regimes in Pyongyang and Tehran by leading international coalitions to sanction and weaken them over time.

The military can't solve global warming

Third, diplomacy will also be our major instrument in confronting the many international challenges ahead for the US – climate change; trafficking of women and children; virulent crime; narcotics and terrorist cartels; the spread of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons; the extraordinary revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa; the need to renew and rebuild NATO and strengthen America's Pacific alliance; the challenge to US power from the rise of China, India, and Brazil.

While the military will continue to be a front-line resource for future presidents on some of these issues, there is no question that this country will have to rely much more on diplomatic power to address most of them. The majority of these problems cannot be resolved by the United States acting alone or in small coalitions or by relying excessively on the use of force. Washington will not be able to ask the Army or the Marines to respond to poverty and climate change or the Navy to address the complex religious and political roots of terrorism.

This renewed commitment to diplomacy is critical for America's national strategy. It is the most practical and effective way to coalesce with allies and friends as well as to confront foes in the decade ahead. That is why leaders in Washington should make the same commitment to rebuild the State Department as they did with the Pentagon, CIA, and Homeland Security in the years following 9/11. Congress fully funded those three pillars of national security but starved the fourth and equally important pillar – diplomats and USAID professionals.

We must also renew the very way we think of national security. After 9/11, President Bush essentially put the military on the front lines of America's international engagement all over the world, with the diplomats in reserve. The military became in the minds of politicians and in the public imagination the default choice for dealing with international problems.

That made sense as the US went after Al Qaeda and the Taliban in the weeks after the 9/11 attacks. It makes little sense now when the great majority of international challenges lend themselves more to political and diplomatic resolution than military power.

Mr. Obama appears to be returning the US quite deliberately and sensibly to the more traditional American approach to the world's problems: Diplomats, aid workers, and nongovernmental organizations are the first responders as America engages the world. The military is in reserve to be used only when absolutely necessary to defend the nation's vital interests.

America will face in the next few years the most dangerous and complex set of international challenges in recent memory. As it returns to diplomacy, political leaders at home must also

resist the pernicious allure of isolationism so evident on the extreme right and left of the political spectrum. Americans must instead renew their global leadership role as the country moves further away from the tragedy of 9/11 and encounters the more complex times ahead.

This will require a substantial evolution in the way Americans think of themselves and their indispensable role in the world.

Nicholas Burns is professor of the practice of diplomacy and international politics, and director of the Future of Diplomacy Project at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He served as under secretary of State for political affairs from 2005 to 2008. Previously, he was US ambassador to NATO. This piece also appeared on the Power & Policy blog at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.