



DEFENSE.info

The Perspective of James
Durso: Washington and
the World



January 2022

<u>IS IT TIME FOR THE U.S. TO ENGAGE WITH THE TALIBAN?</u>	3
<u>DOES THE U.S. (MIS)USE UAE TIES TO COUNTER IRAN AND CHINA?</u>	5
<u>DRONING OUT ACCOUNTABILITY</u>	8
<u>UZBEKISTAN'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: WHAT IS UZBEKISTAN'S PATH TO THE FUTURE?</u>	11
<u>CENTRAL ASIA ON THE FRONT LINES</u>	14
AFGHAN REFUGEES ARE THE FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS	15
ON THE ECONOMIC FRONT	16
<u>CENTRAL ASIA: FROM PAX AMERICANA TO POX AMERICANA?</u>	17
<u>THE PENTAGON SHOULD PROCEED WITH CAUTION IN INVESTING IN THE SPACEX STARSHIP</u>	20
<u>MARK MILLEY 'S LAST BATTLE?</u>	21
<u>U.S. BASES IN CENTRAL ASIA: WHERE WILL THEY GO?</u>	23
<u>THE S-400 TAKES AIM AT U.S. ALLIANCES</u>	26
WILL THE U.S. DEAL?	28
<u>WILL THE SILICON VALLEY MINDSET HELP AMERICA BEAT CHINA IN SPACE?</u>	28
<u>BLACKWATER PARDONS WERE THE RIGHT CALL</u>	30
<u>AMERICA SHOULD STAND WITH FRANCE AGAINST RADICAL ISLAM</u>	31
<u>MILITARY OFFICERS AND POLITICS: JUST SAY NO</u>	34
<u>THE FIGHT AGAINST CHINA'S THEFT OF SPACE TECHNOLOGY</u>	37
<u>ENSURING RELIABILITY IN THE ERA OF PRIVATE SPACE EXPLORATION</u>	38
<u>COMMERCIAL AVIATION IN A POST-COVID-19 FUTURE: THE CASE OF WASHINGTON DC'S DULLES AIRPORT</u>	40
<u>THE NATIONAL SECURITY COST OF BLUE ORIGIN'S BID PROTEST</u>	42
<u>PUTTING SPACE-X IN PERSPECTIVE</u>	44
<i>OTHER RECENT SPACEX MISTAKES</i>	45
<u>AMERICA'S STRATEGIC REALISTS ARE IGNORING FISCAL REALITY</u>	46

James Durso has been a regular contributor to Second Line of Defense and Defense Information. He provides an independent commentary on U.S. policy which focuses on how U.S. interests might be met, but not by pursuing the conventional wisdom of the usual Inside the Beltway pundits.

We have collected pieces which he has published on our websites over the past couple of years, and present those for the pleasure of our readers

James Durso ([@james_durso](#)) is the Managing Director of Corsair LLC, a supply chain consultancy.

He was a professional staff member at the 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission and the Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mr. Durso served as a U.S. Navy officer for 20 years and specialized in logistics and security assistance.

His overseas military postings were in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and he served in Iraq as a civilian transport advisor with the Coalition Provisional Authority.

He served afloat as Supply Officer of the submarine USS SKATE (SSN 578).

Is it Time for the U.S. to Engage with the Taliban?

01/30/2022

Afghanistan's Taliban recently proposed it take a role in aid distribution via the creation of a [joint mechanism](#) with international aid organizations to coordinate the distribution of food aid to the country. According to the Taliban, "The goal of this committee is coordination on a higher level for facilitating humanitarian aid of the international community and to distribute aid for needy people."

Taliban representatives recently [met](#) with Western government officials and Afghan women's rights and human rights activists in Norway. The U.S. delegation [addressed](#) "the formation of a representative political system; responses to the urgent humanitarian and economic crises; security and counterterrorism concerns; and human rights, especially education for girls and women."

Afghanistan's neighbors Central Asia and India aren't dallying. They recently [met and agreed](#) to create working groups to address Afghanistan's food emergency, recognition of the Taliban, and the development of the Iranian port of Chabahar. The U.S. and Europe can help by holding their fire as the neighbors of heavily-sanctioned Iran and Afghanistan attempt to stabilize the region and create economic opportunity that will allow them to distance themselves from China's thrust into the region.

The West needs to get a move on as the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have [declared](#) that 19 million people in Afghanistan are experiencing "high levels of acute food insecurity" and that that number will climb to 22.8 million this winter unless action is taken.

Washington's priorities of a satisfactory (to the U.S.) representative government, and its desires for Afghan women girls should take a back seat to averting a humanitarian catastrophe this winter. Afghans are being forced to [sell their children](#) for food, so more public engagement along with [U.S. food aid](#) will rebound to Washington's benefit.

U.S. policymakers no doubt feel anger and humiliation at the public failure of their two-decade project to reform Pashtun culture.

But refusing practical steps to engage now with the new government in Kabul as disaster looms will show the U.S. and its confederates to be both incompetent and spiteful, a massive in-kind donation to the Taliban's PR campaign internally and aimed at the wider Muslim world.

Recent visitors to Kabul report the Taliban want Americans to return to the country ("Even Erik Prince can come here!"), one reason being to counter [Chinese expansion](#) in the region.

A good start would be visits by U.S. officials to Kabul, as limiting their contacts to the Taliban political office in Doha, Qatar may also be interpreted as a lack of physical courage, which won't inspire confidence in Kabul's new chiefs. It will also give U.S. officials an opportunity to meet the Taliban out of earshot of Qatari officials who, while they have been helpful to the U.S., have their own agenda.

According to the visitors, the roads are open, free of roadblocks, and repair crews are at work. As the country was historically a trading crossroads, now is the time to again make it the connector between Central and South Asia, and a trade partner with Iran's 80 million people.

Fortunately, leaders from Central Asia and South Asia — Uzbekistan and Pakistan — previously acted to connect the regions to increase trade and opportunity. In July, Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan met in Tashkent where they [signed agreements](#) to upgrade their countries' economic relations. The leaders may have been racing the clock, but their project requires an Afghan crossroads where their businesses can trade with without fear of the U.S.

The U.S. attempt to export identity politics to Afghanistan (via demands for a "representative government") may be obliged by the Taliban if they introduce the world to the Afghan Margot Honecker, which will cause wails of "We didn't mean a woman *like that!*" The Taliban aren't neglecting girls' education as private schools – for boys and girls – are open, and the government [promised](#) public schools will all be open after the Afghan New Year in late March.

After the Taliban's August victory, there were few revenge killings and no one has been sent to a reeducation camp. If the Taliban deliver on their promise to open girls' schools in March, the way should be open to consider releasing some Afghan funds seized by the U.S. or waiving sanctions against Taliban leaders so foreign businessmen can start to explore just how ready the Taliban are to engage with them and meet their demands for security and transparency.

The U.S. will have concerns about what the Taliban is doing to repress the Pakistan Taliban (the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)), Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K). If the Taliban follow through on the girls' schools, the U.S. should grant concessions that will facilitate regional trade, then ask Kabul to take action against the three extremist groups. The Taliban may then be likely to move against Al-Qaeda and IS-K, but not against the TTP, and the U.S. will know this if it is clear-eyed, though it should call for action against the TTP, at least to keep Pakistan on-side when Islamabad goes into a funk over the latest American "abandonment."

Pakistan's army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, [described](#) the Afghan Taliban and the TTP as "two sides of the same coin." The Afghan Taliban see the TTP as their Pashtun allies in a conflict with Pakistan over the nominal border, the contested Durand Line. It is a scrap the U.S. will be wise to otherwise avoid, and instead focus on strengthening local economies as a counter to Beijing's designs for Central and South Asia.

The Taliban aren't the baddest actors America ever dealt with.

After World War II, the U.S. quickly hired German scientists and [former Nazi officials](#). The U.S. also gave a pass to leaders of [Unit 731](#), Japan's germ warfare unit that experimented on Allied POWs.

The difference between then and now is that then the U.S. was the victor, so it was easy to be generous, especially as the West was rapidly retooling to confront Communism.

The question for America now is, as it faces a Communist regime in Beijing instead of Moscow, can it be magnanimous in defeat?

Does the U.S. (mis)use UAE ties to Counter Iran and China?

12/20/2021

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) recently made two significant military procurement decisions: it would [buy](#) the French-made Rafale fighter jet, its weapons, and a dozen Airbus H225M Caracal helicopters for combat search and rescue and anti-ship missions; and, it was [suspending](#) discussions with the U.S. for the purchase of the F-35 Lightning II fighter, MQ-9B Reaper drones, and air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons due to "technical requirements, sovereign operational restrictions, and cost/benefit analysis."

Despite the Dear John letter, the emirate said we can still be friends: "The U.S. remains the UAE's preferred provider for advanced defense requirements and discussions for the F-35 may be re-opened in the future."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [replied](#) "We remain prepared to move forward with both [fighter aircraft and drones] if that is what the Emiratis are interested in doing."

The *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) the U.S.-UAE discussions foundered over U.S. concerns the UAE would allow China access to the F-35's technology, though the Emiratis previously [argued](#) they have a perfect record of protecting U.S. technology.

The UAE won't be allowed to make any modifications to the F-35, but French president Emmanuel Macron directed Thales, the builder of the Rafale's electronics to give the UAE access to all the black boxes. Another Middle Eastern country refused to buy U.S. aircraft after Washington demanded information on every sortie, said it would install spyware on the aircraft, and expected the customer to pay the cost of its snap inspections.

The U.S. been concerned about the UAE-China relationship for some time. Washington is worried about the deployment of Huawei 5G wireless technology in the emirate and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The emirate no doubt feels 5G is critical to its competitiveness as a global business hub and tourism destination; the U.S. likely thinks Chinese 5G will give Beijing access to business, military, and political information in the emirate, an operating and transit site for U.S. military forces in the region.

Recently, the UAE, after a U.S. demand, terminated a Chinese-funded \$1 billion project in the Khalifa Port Free Trade Zone the U.S. said had military applications. U.S. President Joe Biden spoke about the project to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed who said he heard Biden “loud and clear,” though the emirate later declared, “our position remains the same, that the facilities were not military facilities.”

This must seem like Groundhog Day for the UAE. In 2006, Dubai-owned DP World was forced to back out of an approved purchase of port management contracts at six major U.S. seaports after the U.S. Congress opposed the deal. Fifteen years later the UAE is learning it can’t even conclude a seaport project at home without a U.S. intervention.

As a result of the U.S. arm twisting, the UAE may have to make an offsetting accommodation to China that the U.S. will like even less, a prime example of “it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

And it’s not just UAE-China ties. Washington is looking askance at attempts by the UAE, Iran’s third-largest trade partner (behind China and the European Union), to improve relations with Tehran, despite the occasional hiccup like Iranian threats after the UAE normalized relations with Israel.

Recently a U.S. delegation visited Abu Dhabi and warned the Emiratis the U.S. has “visibility on transactions [with Iran] that are not compliant with [U.S.] sanctions,” and “Those banks and firms face extreme risk if this continues.”

Why is the U.S. taking a hard line with the UAE over trading with a large, consequential neighbor (Iran) or an emerging technology leader and investor (China)?

The U.S. administration says – and this time it means it! – it is pivoting to Asia. Washington may or may not succeed, but is loath that another regional or global power will fill the vacuum it creates by vacating the region, especially if the new guy is welcomed by the locals, as China seems to be.

How might the UAE see it?

The leaders of the UAE (and Middle East) were likely appalled by the livestreamed rout of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Did they wonder: if the U.S. will walk away from an effort of two decades and over \$2 trillion dollars, do their more modest engagements with Washington matter, regardless of what all those visiting officials say?

As to Iran, there is a large Iranian business presence in the UAE and, if Iran normalizes relations with the rest of the world, the emirate is in the prime location. The U.S. has levied sanctions on Iran since its client, the Shah, fled in 1979 and, in the UAE, that is 42 years of foregone business, all in the name of making the Americans happy. To the UAE, it makes as much sense as the U.S. not trading with Mexico.

And accommodating the U.S. may eventually hurt the UAE, which allows U.S. forces to attack Afghan targets from its bases. The emirate will be a handy target if Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State decide to retaliate for a U.S. strike.

Regarding China, the UAE “has emerged as China’s primary economic partner in the Gulf” and there are more than 4,000 Chinese companies operating in the UAE. The UAE and China are partners in energy, e-commerce, and transportation, and the emirate wants cooperative relationships with Chinese universities to bring technology R&D to the Gulf.

A significant Chinese presence in the UAE would be a boost to Beijing’s project to build strategic strongpoints, ports with “dual-use commercial-military capabilities,” as part of the Maritime Silk Road. The strongpoints are less visible than naval bases, and easier to negotiate than a full-up foreign military base. But, with the exception of specialized weapons-handling facilities, civil and military port facilities are identical, so it is possible the “information” the U.S. gave the UAE about the Khalifa port project was really disinformation to disrupt the growing Chinese-UAE relationship.

China dominates the commercial maritime sector while the U.S. role is seriously diminished. For example, China leads the U.S. in bulk carriers, container ships, oil tankers, natural gas carriers, and chemical tankers. China is the leading manufacturer of shipping equipment, is invested in 100 ports in 60 countries, and is home to seven of the ten busiest ports in the world. Compensating for unfortunate maritime policy choices by using third parties to check China’s growth may work in the short term but won’t change the underpinnings of China’s maritime strategy, and those third parties will weary of being press-ganged into Washington’s war on Beijing.

International business travelers appreciate the UAE’s location, amenities, and business friendly environment. So too do traveling American security service officials who will be rapidly identified and cataloged if the UAE adopts China’s surveillance technology. It’s no joke: the Dubai police rapidly identified the members of the Israeli hit team that killed Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh – and that was using 2010 gear. The U.S. intent may be to displace China as a surveillance technology supplier and, instead of a backdoor to Beijing, the backdoor will be to Washington.

The government of Iran doubled the budget of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) for 2022. Some that money will fund the ongoing expansion of the IRGC’s naval force which regularly exercises keeping foreign navies out of the Gulf by blocking the Strait of Hormuz, which sees a daily flow of “about 21% of global petroleum liquids consumption.”

The UAE would have found those F-35s and drones useful to counter Iranian naval pressure, but operational restrictions that limit their use to U.S.-approved scenarios will make the UAE military an arm of the U.S. and limit its local freedom of action if that would conflict with U.S. goals wherever else Iran is active, such as Lebanon. So much for a U.S. Middle East policy to “...work with our regional partners to deter Iranian aggression and threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity...”

The UAE’s ruling families enjoy public support to the extent they focus on economic fundamentals. The Emirates’ leaders may be ready to adjust aspects of their strategy and tactics to cooperate with the U.S., but Washington appears to be oblivious to – or maybe it just doesn’t care – if its preferences negatively affect the economies of its friends.

Given the meaningless successes Washington scored against the UAE's sovereignty there's one question: Was the "cost/benefit analysis" the UAE referred to about its wider relationship with America or just the F-35?

Droning Out Accountability

12/05/2021

Violent extremists have a secret ally in the Pentagon. No, not some military officer who voted for Donald Trump and wears a MAGA hat on weekends when he visits gun shows — the secret ally is the U.S. military's persistent failure to hold anyone accountable when a battlefield mistake kills innocent civilians.

The stock U.S. reply to the accidental killing of civilians in drone attacks is that it will conduct a thorough investigation, with the implication that punishment will be meted out — but that never happens. When you just lost a family member due to an inattentive or inexperienced watch stander in Indian Springs, the fact that his next promotion may be delayed six months doesn't look like justice. But if Russia or Iran screw up — and they did when they shot down MH17 and PS752 — the U.S. demands a trial at The Hague and new rounds of sanctions.

The military's explanation after every accidental killing is "mistakes were made, but no one did anything wrong."

The military's explanation after every accidental killing is "mistakes were made, but no one did anything wrong."

America's shambolic retreat from Afghanistan was made even more ridiculous by the not-so-funny killing of ten members of a family, including seven children, when the U.S. forces attacked who they thought was an ISIS facilitator, a rushed revenge attack justified as a "righteous strike" by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley.

The truth came out because there were journalists in the capital city of Kabul, unlike many other errant strikes in isolated places in Afghanistan or Pakistan, and the Pentagon's story unraveled when The New York Times reported the deaths of the Ahmadi family, headed by a man who worked for a U.S.-based aid organization, who hoped to emigrate to the U.S.

Tragedy became farce when the military later admitted it couldn't find the safe house where the mythical ISIS facilitator was based, despite tracking Mr. Ahmadi all day as he drove around Kabul.

With the truth out, the U.S. military promised a full investigation and, a month later, the U.S. Air Force Inspector General (IG) announced that its review found that "execution errors" (no pun intended) caused the civilian casualties but recommended no disciplinary action, because the troops "truly believed" they were targeting a threat to U.S. forces. Well, OK then.

"Regrettably" was sprinkled throughout, a word salad that left the victims' survivors likely thinking the U.S. was using its laws to avoid justice.

The IG report was referred to the operational commanders who will probably issue a few letters of caution to some lower ranks, then cite the Privacy Act so they will be forever anonymous. In the hands of a decent lawyer, the “mistakes were made” IG finding will bind the hands of any commander who thinks punishment is warranted.

So, America’s intelligence apparatus — all-seeing, but unknowing — misidentified a family residence as a safe house, tracked the wrong white Toyota Corolla, and killed the wrong people. Six armed drones, and layers of analysts and reviewers — probably 100 people — from Afghanistan to Qatar to Nevada, were involved ... and they blew it.

These errors are a labor-saving device for America’s enemies, who can make the case that the U.S. is careless when foreign lives are at stake.

If drones turn out to be a recruiting sergeant for ISIS, we may have to admit that while they’re tactically effective, they are an expensive strategic liability that create more enemies than they kill.

For example, the U.S. tried five times to kill Qari Hussain, a deputy commander of the Pakistani Taliban, before getting lucky the sixth time on Oct. 15, 2010 — but in the process they killed 128 unlucky people, 13 of them children.

Regrettably.

After an accident, the military’s priority is to shield its members from civil lawsuits in the U.S., or prosecution in a foreign court that would result in an Interpol Red Notice when the offending troops fail to appear. The U.S. wants to avoid a repeat of the trial in Italy of 22 CIA officers and a U.S. Air Force colonel for the 2003 kidnapping of the convicted terrorist, Abu Omar. All 23 were found guilty in absentia and one of the CIA officers was arrested when she later traveled to Europe.

Drones play to America’s strength — technology — and put no Americans at risk, but the strategic downside is never priced in. The response to U.S. drones will be more drones, but deployed by the opposition, who — if they can’t attack U.S. troops — will settle for soft targets like American embassies, or U.S. allies. And drones’ low cost means civil conflicts — where U.S. troops may be deployed as peacekeepers — will get even deadlier as armed gangs, many styled as “militias,” can now field an air arm for surveillance or attack.

So, America’s drone attacks will prompt an asymmetric response that will be labeled “terrorism,” justifying more drone strikes, and more responses, ad nauseum.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the Pentagon “must work harder” to reduce civilian casualties of U.S. air strikes. Coming 20 years after the first drone operation, on Oct. 7, 2001, which also failed, it proves the smell of cordite isn’t enough to make the military move faster than government speed.

The resulting Pentagon bureaucratic to-and-fro will result in a more detailed pre-strike checklist, but the cat is out of the bag, and the U.S. no longer has the luxury of air superiority, ironically due to the drone technology it pioneered.

This article was first published by The Hill on November 24, 2021 and is republished with the permission of the author.

Violent extremists have a secret ally in the Pentagon. No, not some military officer who voted for Donald Trump and wears a MAGA hat on weekends when he visits gun shows — the secret ally is the U.S. military’s persistent failure to hold anyone accountable when a battlefield mistake kills innocent civilians.

The stock U.S. reply to the accidental killing of civilians in drone attacks is that it will conduct a thorough investigation, with the implication that punishment will be meted out — but that never happens. When you just lost a family member due to an inattentive or inexperienced watch stander in Indian Springs, the fact that his next promotion may be delayed six months doesn’t look like justice. But if Russia or Iran screw up — and they did when they shot down MH17 and PS752 — the U.S. demands a trial at The Hague and new rounds of sanctions.

The military’s explanation after every accidental killing is “mistakes were made, but no one did anything wrong.”

The military’s explanation after every accidental killing is “mistakes were made, but no one did anything wrong.”

America’s shambolic retreat from Afghanistan was made even more ridiculous by the not-so-funny killing of ten members of a family, including seven children, when the U.S. forces attacked who they thought was an ISIS facilitator, a rushed revenge attack justified as a “righteous strike” by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley.

The truth came out because there were journalists in the capital city of Kabul, unlike many other errant strikes in isolated places in Afghanistan or Pakistan, and the Pentagon’s story unraveled when The New York Times reported the deaths of the Ahmadi family, headed by a man who worked for a U.S.-based aid organization, who hoped to emigrate to the U.S.

Tragedy became farce when the military later admitted it couldn’t find the safe house where the mythical ISIS facilitator was based, despite tracking Mr. Ahmadi all day as he drove around Kabul.

With the truth out, the U.S. military promised a full investigation and, a month later, the U.S. Air Force Inspector General (IG) announced that its review found that “execution errors” (no pun intended) caused the civilian casualties but recommended no disciplinary action, because the troops “truly believed” they were targeting a threat to U.S. forces. Well, OK then.

“Regrettably” was sprinkled throughout, a word salad that left the victims’ survivors likely thinking the U.S. was using its laws to avoid justice.

The IG report was referred to the operational commanders who will probably issue a few letters of caution to some lower ranks, then cite the Privacy Act so they will be forever anonymous. In the hands of a decent lawyer, the “mistakes were made” IG finding will bind the hands of any commander who thinks punishment is warranted.

So, America’s intelligence apparatus — all-seeing, but unknowing — misidentified a family residence as a safe house, tracked the wrong white Toyota Corolla, and killed the wrong people. Six armed drones, and layers of analysts and reviewers — probably 100 people — from Afghanistan to Qatar to Nevada, were involved ... and they blew it.

These errors are a labor-saving device for America's enemies, who can make the case that the U.S. is careless when foreign lives are at stake.

If drones turn out to be a recruiting sergeant for ISIS, we may have to admit that while they're tactically effective, they are an expensive strategic liability that create more enemies than they kill.

For example, the U.S. tried five times to kill Qari Hussain, a deputy commander of the Pakistani Taliban, before getting lucky the sixth time on Oct. 15, 2010 — but in the process they killed 128 unlucky people, 13 of them children.

Regrettably.

After an accident, the military's priority is to shield its members from civil lawsuits in the U.S., or prosecution in a foreign court that would result in an Interpol Red Notice when the offending troops fail to appear. The U.S. wants to avoid a repeat of the trial in Italy of 22 CIA officers and a U.S. Air Force colonel for the 2003 kidnapping of the convicted terrorist, Abu Omar. All 23 were found guilty in absentia and one of the CIA officers was arrested when she later traveled to Europe.

Drones play to America's strength — technology — and put no Americans at risk, but the strategic downside is never priced in. The response to U.S. drones will be more drones, but deployed by the opposition, who — if they can't attack U.S. troops — will settle for soft targets like American embassies, or U.S. allies. And drones' low cost means civil conflicts — where U.S. troops may be deployed as peacekeepers — will get even deadlier as armed gangs, many styled as "militias," can now field an air arm for surveillance or attack.

So, America's drone attacks will prompt an asymmetric response that will be labeled "terrorism," justifying more drone strikes, and more responses, ad nauseum.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the Pentagon "must work harder" to reduce civilian casualties of U.S. air strikes. Coming 20 years after the first drone operation, on Oct. 7, 2001, which also failed, it proves the smell of cordite isn't enough to make the military move faster than government speed.

The resulting Pentagon bureaucratic to-and-fro will result in a more detailed pre-strike checklist, but the cat is out of the bag, and the U.S. no longer has the luxury of air superiority, ironically due to the drone technology it pioneered.

This article was first published by The Hill on November 24, 2021 and is republished with the permission of the author.

Uzbekistan's Presidential Elections: What is Uzbekistan's Path to the Future?

11/13/2021

Uzbeks headed to the polls on 24 October to elect a president. The incumbent, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, was expected to win handily, and he did, with 80.1% of the ballots, down from 89.1% in 2016. (Voter participation was 80.4%.)

The voting proceeded smoothly and results were promptly reported by the Central Election Commission, but critics called the elections “choice-free,” “carefully choreographed,” and “not truly competitive.”

Most Uzbek citizens were focused on economic issues, while foreign observers bemoaned the lack of a political party opposed to the government of the day.

Since 1999, Uzbekistan has hosted election observation missions by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) that have observed presidential and parliamentary elections. Uzbek officials prefer OSCE missions as opposed to missions sponsored by other friendly countries as they believe the OSCE will provide important feedback useful for improving future elections without the expectation of a *quid quo pro*.

This election was Uzbekistan’s second presidential election after the 26-year tenure of Islam Karimov, who was appointed leader of the then-Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in 1989.

Uzbekistan’s post-Soviet period started not in 1991, but in 2016, with the election of then-Prime Minister Mirziyoyev as president. Islam Karimov was a Soviet *apparatchik* to the end, risk-averse and favoring incremental improvements, so the country suffered an extended Era of Stagnation, as in the Brezhnev years in the late-period Soviet Union.

When Mirziyoyev was elected president in 2016, he was the natural candidate after 13 years as the country’s Prime Minister and #2. 2021 was the first election where the voters could pass judgement on the performance of the government and its reform policies, or as former New York City mayor Ed Koch used to say, “How’m I doing?”

As to how it’s doing, the OSCE reported that, while “The Central Election Commission (CEC) conducted its work professionally and efficiently in line with the legal deadlines” and “Election preparations were handled efficiently and professionally” and “demonstrated that recent reforms, which have gradually introduced welcome improvements,” the process fell short of observers’ expectations as “recent reforms, which have gradually introduced welcome improvements, have not yet resulted in a genuinely pluralistic environment.”

Though the observers’ comments may color the policies of foreign powers, President Mirziyoyev’s first consideration is the needs of Uzbeks and, for now, those needs are primarily economic. These needs may change over time, and it’s the responsibility of the country’s leaders to anticipate and satisfy those shifts but for now pocketbook predominate.

The country’s proximity to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan means the government will prioritize regional cooperation, stability, and prosperity, as it continues its reform program. A prosperous Uzbekistan will be better able to withstand pressures from Russia and China, and Islamists who feel the wind at their back after the Taliban victory over NATO. The policies of the U.S. and the West should avoid making perfect the enemy of real progress.

Uzbekistan hosted U.S. forces from 2001 to 2005, when they were ejected after Washington criticized the government's response to the violent uprising in the city of Andijan. A 2021 Uzbekistan with a stronger economy won't be any more compliant and will have not neglect economic relations with China, what Uzbek Senator (and former Foreign Minister) Sodik Safoyev calls a "huge opportunity."

There are foreign concerns the government is attuned to and they are in the realm of business and investments. The government's reform policies have attracted investors and the proof is the country's rise as it climbed "from ranking 141st in the World Bank's index on ease of doing business in 2015 to 69th last year [2020]". (The priorities of foreign investors – competent officials, honest courts, and transparent government policies – are also the wants of foreign and domestic political activists, so economic reform will give the activists what they want – but with less drama – while it increases local economic opportunity: a win-win.)

Though economic progress has been undeniable, many speakers at the recent Uzbekistan Economic Forum noted there are limits to privatization and that the economy must diversify away from agriculture and business must become more competitive in order to help meet the state's goals of halving poverty by 2026 and becoming an upper-middle income country by 2030.

Politically-engaged Uzbeks of a certain age will remember "party building" (партийное строительство) and it may make a comeback but in a different form.

Regular elections are a good thing, but Iran and North Korea also have regular elections. Real elections are the surface manifestation of a healthy political culture and the next step for the country is encouraging healthy political parties, instead of a future of small opposition parties versus "the party of the leader."

Developing political parties will attract outside attention and money, so this may be a point of friction if it appears foreign interests want to groom favorites, especially if they espouse policies more in line with Western interests than the country's conservative, family-oriented culture. Given the NATO's recent failure at social transformation in a country not too far from Uzbekistan, that should give pause to putative reformers...but it may not.

The Uzbeks have already been through a project of social transformation, courtesy of the Bolsheviks, that got them revolution, forced collectivization, famine, purges, and over a half-million dead during World War II (over 8% of the population)...just the kind of thing to make you wary of ideas that come out of reading rooms in Europe. The difference between then and now is that, according to Melki Kaylan, "For the first time, they [Uzbeks] were living in a country that was improving."

Aside from friction over political party development, there is a concern that President Mirziyoyev may engineer a third presidential term via "constitutional reform." That he may, and if the constitution is legally amended, and a third term is in tune with public sentiment, it may frustrate interests who want to see a successor more in tune with Europe and North America than Central Asia. (Every politician thinks he's immortal and they don't make 'em any different in Tashkent.)

But President Mirziyoyev's resounding win may create more public pressure for him to deliver what he promised on the campaign trail, in addition to the uncompleted tasks from his first term. His success, or failure, at satisfying the rising expectation of Uzbek citizens, will color their support for any efforts to change the constitution to ensure his continued tenure.

The outside world must stay focused on the real priorities in Central Asia: regional cooperation, growing economies that offer more opportunity to citizens and enable the governments to avoid the ominous embraces of Russia and China, ensuring stability in a region that hosts East-West transport links, and resisting extremism that may bleed over from Afghanistan.

Central Asia on the Front Lines

09/21/2021

The U.S. retreat from Afghanistan puts Central Asia on the front lines against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The Central Asian republics – old cultures but young countries – are still competing the process of state formation started thirty years ago with the fall of the Soviet Union, so this is a challenging time to be on the doorstep of a threatening Afghanistan.

Central Asia aided the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) during the war in Afghanistan by providing access to airfields (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan), allowing aircraft overflights, and facilitating the resupply of NATO via the Northern Distribution Network (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan).

Among the states on Afghanistan's border, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan previously met Taliban delegations, recognizing the movement would be a force regardless of the final outcome in Afghanistan. This was in line with Turkmenistan's principle of "positive neutrality" and, despite its aversion to Islamists, the government hosted a Taliban delegation in July. Uzbekistan hosted a Taliban delegation in 2018 and encouraged peace talks between the Taliban and the Kabul government, continuing the country's pragmatic approach to Afghanistan. (The former president, Islam Karimov, said "Tashkent is ready to recognize any government in Afghanistan, even if it is the Taliban government. It doesn't matter whether we like that government or not.") Tajikistan will likely continue its policy of opposition to the Taliban and has said it will not recognize a Taliban government that does not include all the country's ethnic groups.

These differences may make it hard to forge a common regional approach to Afghanistan that must also include Kazakhstan, the largest economy and Uzbekistan's rival for regional leadership, and Kyrgyzstan. Complicating that process is that Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-led security alliance.

The rapid collapse of the U.S. client government in Kabul caught the local capitals – and Washington – by surprise. They had earlier told the U.S. they would not welcome thousands of Afghan refugees, likely because they remember it took Washington up to eight years to find new homes for Uighur detainees at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp after they were declared "No longer enemy combatants." Regardless, refugees have fled to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan which are accepting them only if they promptly continue onwards to places of permanent resettlement.

The Central Asian capitals want a prompt resolution of the refugee situation and the recognition of a government in Kabul so they can focus on the regional connectivity projects they need to grow and diversify their economies.

They will look over their shoulder at Moscow and Beijing, but their policy priority will be the economy, which may give less weight to what Washington and Brussels want, especially as Washington vacated the area so fast it left several planeloads of its citizens stranded in Afghanistan. Though the long-term consideration is economic, in the near term the Central Asians will have to shape the security environment as a prelude to future economic growth.

Washington 's distance from the region, which previously allowed the U.S. to be the regional balancer as it had no local territorial aspirations, will now work against it as it has nothing at risk – unlike neighboring Russia, as Moscow will remind local capitals.

The readiness of the U.S. to walk away from an investment of \$2.3 trillion and over 2,300 deaths – unimaginable sums – will cause a loss of confidence in U.S. assurances of fidelity as its local investment relatively negligible.

Instead, Russia's menacing embrace of the locals will be rebranded to “standing shoulder to shoulder against instability and extremism” (don't call it a “buffer zone!”), and an opportunity to draw all five countries into the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Afghan Refugees are the First Order of Business

The Central Asian states don't want them and made that clear to Washington; they're America's problem. The best Washington can hope for is they will allow the refugees to rapidly transit their territory enroute Europe or the U.S. (Though Kazakhstan is considering welcoming ethnic Kazahs from Afghanistan to the country.)

Their concerns are rooted in a need to establish cordial relations with the Taliban in order to pursue regional economic projects; keep terrorist sleepers out of the refugee flow through their territory; ensure refugees don't cause local instability which will cause more illegal immigration to Russia and possibly endanger their visa-free regime with Moscow; and ensure they don't host members or resupply links of an Afghan resistance which will draw Taliban cross-border reprisals.

If the Taliban consolidates power it will seek to sideline its foe, ISIS-K (Islamic State in Khorasan Province), which will see an uptick in local violence, or an ISIS-K retreat into Central Asia or Pakistan. In response, ISIS-K may summon its Central Asian members who fought in Syria and Iraq and want to being the fight home. And groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has carried out attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, will feel emboldened to operate freely.

The local security response included refusing the U.S. basing rights for its “over the horizon” strikes and reconnaissance, reinforcing the borders with Afghanistan, and military maneuvers with Russian units – though U.S. projects to upgrade border security will be welcome. In June, Russia rejected U.S. troops in the region, but offered to host U.S. units at its bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Russia bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are not the only remaining foreign bases in the region. Tajikistan obviously believes in being a friend to all as it hosts military bases of Russia, China, and India. Iran and Tajikistan have discussed joint measures against “against terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking and organized crime,” and they recently announced a military cooperation agreement. Tajikistan is also a member of the Moscow-lead CSTO.

The five Central Asian leaders made remarks on 1 September, Knowledge Day, the start of the school year. Regarding Afghanistan, they spoke of the need for “peace and stability” and secure borders.

A week later, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with the foreign ministers of Afghanistan’s neighbors. Wang emphasized the need for cooperation regarding the pandemic, borders, refugees, humanitarian aid, anti-terrorism, and counternarcotics operations. Wang also welcomed the Taliban’s “positive statements” but stressed the Taliban must turn their words into deeds.

Central Asian countries may hang back, let China take the lead creating a regional approach to Kabul, perhaps through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and spend their energies shoring up their borders, and dealing with the economy, the pandemic, and refugees. After all, China will likely want to exploit the Afghan rare earth deposits, bring the country into the Belt & Road Initiative, use Afghanistan as an unobstructed surface path to Iran, and maybe realize that dream of an oil pipeline from Iran to China as part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, so Beijing can do most of the heavy lifting for now.

India and Russia have decided to work together to erect a firewall to protect Central Asia from the “spill-over of Islamic radicalization and jihad from Taliban-ruled Kabul.” This bilateral initiative may dilute a role for the SCO, but could be an opportunity for the “Big 3” in the region if Moscow and Delhi invite in Beijing, which may weaken China’s support for the goals in Afghanistan of Pakistan, its “all weather friend.”

India will welcome the opportunity to reaffirm its longtime relationship with Russia at a time when relations with Washington are rocky over the purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system, and to solidify relations with Central Asia by offering opportunities for investments, and technical cooperation and education, something Pakistan cannot match.

On the Economic Front

After an expression of interest from the Taliban, Turkmenistan will want to complete the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) power line; to connect Afghanistan to Turkmenistan by railway; and to finish the moribund Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline to access South Asian markets, which may be possible with Pakistan’s support. Completing TAPI in the uncertain political and security environment of Afghanistan at the same time it looks to privatize state-owned Turkmengaz will test the dexterity of the Turkmen leadership (and the patience of their partners in TAPI).

Uzbekistan, which recently hosted a conference on connecting Central Asia and South Asia, has prioritized transport through Pakistan to the ports of Gwadar and Karachi over routes through Iran, but that direct route relies on stability in Afghanistan. Despite the recent, public bonhomie between the leaders of Pakistan and Uzbekistan, Tashkent must be wary of Islamabad’s impulses to weaponize transport links from Central Asia against India to bolster its policy of “strategic depth” which will surely disrupt a mooted Indian-Uzbek bilateral investment treaty.

All the same, Tashkent should ensure Plan B – a land corridor south to Iran’s ports of Chabahar (on the Gulf of Oman) and Bandar Abbas (on the Persian Gulf), and access to Iran’s large market which relies on food imports.

Tajikistan has been less conciliatory toward the Taliban and its licit trade is a negligible \$70 million per year, though one-third of the Tajik economy comes from narcotics trafficking. Tajik President

Emomali Rahmon may be positioning himself as the protector of Afghanistan's Tajiks – one-third of the population – and by calling for an inclusive Afghan government. If the Taliban again crack down on poppy production, they can strike an economic blow against the Rahmon government, but the Taliban decision to stop or allow poppy production may rest on its ability to access foreign aid funds or Afghanistan's money in foreign banks.

There have been some flickers of a resumption of trade between Afghanistan and the neighbors: two trainloads of cargo from Uzbekistan arrived in Afghanistan, Iran resumed shipments of petrol and gas oil at the Taliban's request, and the Kabul airport is back in operation. But it's still early days and the Taliban will have to prove to be a reliable trade partner that respects international business practices if it wants to earn its way out of economic stagnation.

The U.S. evacuation of Afghanistan will see several other changes in its wake.

The region will see expanded roles for security and political groups led by Moscow (CSTO and EEU) and Beijing (SCO and maybe the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). Afghanistan and its neighbors are SCO members, but there is no representation by the U.S. or any Western European ally, which will suit Beijing just fine as it can emphasize "local solutions to local problems" instead of schemes by far-away "meddlers" looking "to stir up trouble."

In Central Asia, the region's population views Russia and China more positively than America so leaders may have leeway for closer relations with Moscow and Beijing so long as they appear to be maintaining sovereignty and independence, and growing the economy.

Local views of the U.S. will change. Everyone will be perfectly polite with U.S. envoys even as they think *You did this*, but local leaders will adopt a wait-and-see approach to Washington.

If the U.S. wants to motivate action it may have to make a cash money vote – up-front and in full, do a free trade deal, or make a public declaration in support of a local political claim – basically something that can't be walked back on a whim.

The locals have seen that, despite spending \$2 trillion dollars, that troops may be withdrawn, logistics support can be denied, and political will can evaporate literally overnight once the U.S. leaders are gripped by an arbitrary deadline.

Central Asia: From Pax Americana to Pox Americana?

08/30/2021

The fall of the American client government in Afghanistan has thrust Central Asia onto the front line between the rest of the world and what has been called a "cradle of jihad."

U.S. engagement with Central Asia has typically been sporadic and transactional, but the fall of Kabul may force Washington to pay sustained attention to the region.

In 2002, the U.S. Department of State published “United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity.” The strategy’s goal was to support local “sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity” which would have been considerably easier without a jihadist regime in Kabul.

The U.S. must continue to engage with Central Asia in the wake of the Afghanistan debacle, but the local interlocutors will be thinking *You did this*.

The first order of business is to ensure that the upcoming political transitions go smoothly. In October, Uzbekistan will conduct a presidential election and the incumbent, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, is expected to win handily. In Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon is positioning his son, Rustam, as his successor. Both countries border on Afghanistan and will be buffeted by refugee flows and economic downturns, so the order of the day should be “steady as she goes.”

Next, ensure policy supports local economies which have been buffeted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the pandemic, Central Asian economies contracted by 2.1% on 2020, what the International Monetary Fund calls a “sizable turnabout after a year of strong growth in 2019 (4.8 percent).”

The U.S. departure will require increased security expenditures by local governments to deal with threats from Afghanistan. If the Taliban increases drug smuggling to raise money, local governments will have to spend more while dealing with the threats posed by organized crime networks that are cooperating with the Islamists in Kabul.

If the Taliban cannot enforce a rough stability in Afghanistan, Central Asia- South Asia trade won’t fully develop, Central Asia will be reliant on paths controlled or influenced by Moscow and China, and the region will never get reliable access to the large Indian market. Likewise, plans for regional infrastructure improvements will be at risk.

Also at risk are local exports to Afghanistan which, in 2019, imported over \$600 million in vegetables, over \$700 million in fuels, and sizeable amounts of chemicals and metals. The economic impact to the region will be across many business sectors, so the near-term prognosis will be reduced export income but increased security expenditures.

The U.S. can strengthen local economies and institutions by targeting its assistance efforts to anti-corruption agencies, tax collection, the judiciary and court administrators, independent regulatory agencies, and the adoption of international standards in finance, banking, and insurance, all of which will ensure the region stays attractive to investors.

Also, the U.S. can help local governments build resilience by providing alternate financing to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, though U.S. opposition to development bank financing for most fossil fuel projects will cede that portfolio to China and Russia.

The U.S. social engineering project is looking tattered after Afghanistan, so it should focus on strengthening local economies and governance institutions, not engaging with “civil society” which is a soft power program to empower the local political opposition until it delivers Washington’s preferred candidate. Economics and those boring ISO standards are less exciting for local diplomats than adopting their local pet activist but that is what pursuing the national interest looks like.

An improving economy and effective administration will put more money in local pockets, improve service delivery by governments, raise citizens' expectations of government performance and accountability and, ultimately, enhance the legitimacy of governing institutions.

Third, the security cooperation will become more complex as the local powers, Russia and China, pursue their interests unconstrained by U.S. concerns. Russia may focus on shoring up its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, but the NATO retreat will allow China to open an uncontested path to Iran (and the Persian Gulf) via Afghanistan, nicely complementing the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, which gives Beijing access to the Arabian Sea.

In a message to the region, Russia announced that it and China would work to counter terrorism and drug trafficking from Afghanistan and “preventing spread of instability to neighbouring regions.” That message may resonate with people in Central Asia as regional polls indicate that “Russia enjoys evident dominance in public opinion, China is in a relatively well-regarded second place, and the U.S. comes in decidedly last.” And the prevalence of Russian language media will ensure Moscow’s message gets through.

The U.S. got the first taste of the new order in June when Russian president Vladimir Putin vetoed the presence of U.S. troops in Central Asia, forcing Washington to rely on bases in the Persian Gulf to fly to Afghanistan.

In August, troops from Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan held drills in Tajikistan, and Moscow announced it was “ready to deliver weapons and equipment to Central Asian allies that border Afghanistan” and at “at special low prices.” On the other hand, in July Putin suggested the U.S. and Russia coordinate actions in Afghanistan and he offered the U.S. the use of Russian military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, but the U.S. has yet to respond.

However the U.S. and Russia cooperate, Moscow will take the opportunity to integrate all of Central Asia into the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union, unless the West can give them a better offer – and not make it sound like a threat. And though China appears to be eclipsing Russia economically in the region, they will cooperate to create a Central Asian exclusion zone, to the detriment of the U.S. and Europe.

The U.S. recently tried to get Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to accept several thousand Afghan refugees while they underwent security screening. The locals refused, no doubt because they remember it took Washington up to eight years to find new homes for Uighur detainees at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp after they were declared “No longer enemy combatants.”

The Central Asian states will maintain cordial relations with the U.S. but may be reluctant to draw too close to the retreating U.S. as Washington is far, far away and Russia and China (and the Taliban) are local realities.

For example, Tashkent has maintained contact with the Taliban and has been open about it since the August 2018 talks that encouraged an Afghan peace process.

Washington should use the C5+1 mechanism to coordinate a regional response to the Taliban regime that respects local political and economic interests, and to eventually bring Kabul into regional deliberations.

The challenge for the U.S. in what is already being called a “post-American Central Asia” will be to exercise restraint and empathy as it negotiates in a space where it can no longer rely on the old *modus operandi*, “So let it be written, so let it be done.”

The Pentagon Should Proceed with Caution in Investing in the SpaceX Starship

07/14/2021

The Air Force motto is “Aim High,” but a better suggestion is “Buyer beware.”

In its 2022 funding request, the U.S. Air Force revealed it is looking to invest nearly \$50 million into the research and development of rocket payload delivery systems for the rapid transport of cargo and troops across the globe. While the branch has indicated that the investment isn’t geared towards any particular company, most observers believe that the outlined criteria — rapid reusability and 100,000-ton cargo capacity — suggest it is considering SpaceX’s Starship prototype.

If the Air Force announces it is investing in Starship, the news will come less than a year after the Space Force entered into a direct development agreement with SpaceX with a similar goal in mind: the prospect of global one-hour payload delivery. If the Department of Defense (DoD) decides to pursue this unproven technology, it needs to proceed with caution.

For Starship, Musk said he has a goal of \$2 million per launch and delivery, which would provide same-day reusability with greater carrying capacity at a fraction of current costs. The Air Force has been dealing with a thin budget for years, which has increased the need for smart investments with high probability returns. However, while SpaceX’s standing in the commercial space industry has presented many positives, the company is also known for unpredictable development schedules, which could undercut the same cause the Air Force is seemingly trying to help.

For example, in 2018, after years of delays and setbacks with its cargo delivery rockets, the space company conceded that it had to revise its contract with NASA and raise prices by 50-percent. According to an audit from the NASA Office of Inspector General, it did so because it received a “better understanding of the costs involved after several years of experience with cargo resupply missions.” The Air Force should keep this in mind when considering the viability of SpaceX’s current Starship plans.

Musk often overstates his company’s capabilities, and even he concedes that the latest figures he provided for Starship sound “insane.” Nothing about Starship’s development demonstrates this time will be any different.

An independent analysis thinks that a conservative estimate for Starship would exceed a few billion in development costs, likely surpassing \$216 million per rocket. To get to that “insane” \$2 million per launch number, Musk would need to launch his planned Starship fleet 10 million times. Whether he believes that number is attainable or not, Musk should know that 10 million launches will take many years to achieve, and it isn’t an honest way to sell his services.

Musk is likely trying to make his product appear cheaper on paper than the current delivery system, which utilize aircraft that cost in the ballpark of \$218 million. However, absent Musk's promises, the Air Force may find itself left sponsoring a craft that regulators have labeled incredibly risky. That doesn't seem like a smart investment strategy that the U.S. Air Force should follow.

If Starship does eventually end up working, the Air Force would then have to overcome the complexities of international spaceship tracking — a field that is slow in its development due to geopolitical tensions.

Unlike airplanes, these rockets will travel at the same speed as a missile and fly in a similar path until the slow landing. A good air defense system won't wait for the slowdown. It will intercept the projectile before it has time to change speeds.

The Air Force would need to utilize a global tracking system so that Starship isn't mistaken for a ballistic missile on radar and needlessly shot down. It would likely mirror the current air traffic system that prevents commercial aircraft from being mistaken for military intruders. However, even with a global agreement for spaceship tracking, an increase in rocket launches would still increase the chances of a "mishap" like the one that nearly sent the U.S. to war with the Soviet Union in 1983.

This threat becomes more concerning when one considers Musk's plans to put people on board. The military vehicles would look nearly identical to SpaceX's planned commercial vehicles, making eventual civilian travel more dangerous. An incident with commercial travel could mimic the sinking of the Lusitania and lead to an avoidable escalation between America and its foreign competitors, which then became foes.

So, if the DoD is serious about pushing for space-based payload delivery, it should be clear about its plans to overcome severe obstacles around cooperation agreements with strategic competitors like China and Russia.

Yet, the DoD seems ready to pursue this pipedream at the taxpayers' expense with little consideration for the many problems it could pose — both at home and abroad. Senators such as Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) and Kevin Cramer (R-ND) have recently criticized the direction the Biden DoD is heading in terms of spending prioritization. Perhaps Congress needs to step up and call out risky investment strategies like this one as well.

Mark Milley 's Last Battle?

07/04/2021

The key to a successful military career is being able to recognize a threat, then take decisive action against it, but not in the case of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley.

After his recent performance on the Hill, you don't want be in a foxhole with this guy.

General Milley recently testified to the House of Representatives on teaching Critical Race Theory (CRT) to service members. He was criticized by conservatives for weighing in on cultural issues, but was applauded by liberals for being an "an empathetic, racially aware, and humanitarian general." Milley's money quote was, "I want to understand white rage. And I'm white."

If the general wants see white rage he should go to Portland where it tried to burn down the federal courthouse, and blinded police officers.

But Milley is *au courant*: he mouths the right words, like “white rage” and called the violent demonstration at the Capitol on January 6th “sedition and insurrection.” The inability to distinguish an imaginary threat – the January 6 protesters – from the real thing – Critical Race Theory which seeks to delegitimize America in pursuit of a system of totalitarian collectivism – is why America lost in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The general’s uncritical use of an enemy’s lexicon is an example of “ideological capture” and one critic pointed out that “to use it at face value is to accept the doctrine rather than to read merely to be informed about its content.”

Of course, talking about CRT is a way to change the topic from the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan, and accusations the Pentagon is downplaying the Taliban’s gains on the ground. It also helps present a new enemy – domestic white supremacists – that may look like an easier nut to crack than Russia or China (or farmers with rifles known as the Taliban), and can be used to justify a bigger military budget.

To the dismay of the brass, white rage may be like Bigfoot – a blurry image, seen at a distance, that can never be proven – again demonstrating the demand for white supremacy in America exceeds the supply.

Admiral Mike Gilday, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), also testified about including CRT texts on his professional reading list but his adiaborous characterization of them as professional reading akin to *Dutton’s Nautical Navigation*, instead of an opportunity to “know the enemy,” is proof of either insouciance or an inability to understand that America has ideological enemies that mean it harm, not just geopolitical competitors like Russia and China that want to expand their spheres of influence.

And, given the preventable high-seas collisions that killed seventeen sailors and highlighted long-standing deficiencies in material readiness, ship handling, and navigation, more *Dutton’s* and less *White Fragility* may be, literally, a matter of life and death.

The general and the admiral may be waiting for their cue from Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin who still hasn’t defined “extremism,” though military whistleblowers have complained their commanders are pushing CRT on them and many members are resigning as a result. (They’re wise to get out now as diversity training has been shown to promote prejudice, which is bad enough at an insurance company but fatal in a military unit when it degrades unit cohesion.) And Secretary Austin admitted the military isn’t a racist institution only when pressed by a senator – after mandating a military-wide stand-down to address the systemic problem he now says may not exist.

In the wake of the testimony, Fox TV host Tucker Carlson criticized Milley as “obsequious” (which echoes a previous critique of Milley as a “perpetual hype man.”)

Milley allies (or Carlson enemies) defended Milley, but didn’t explain why any government official be immune to criticism, or even mockery, especially, when they lead an organization just blew over \$6 trillion in the unsuccessful post-9/11 military campaigns.

A February 2021 poll by the Ronald Reagan Institute found public confidence in the military has dropped precipitously in the last three years. The institute’s poll found about 56 percent of Americans

surveyed said they have “a great deal of trust and confidence” in the military, down from 70 percent in 2018

General Milley and Admiral Gilday are no doubt alert to the prevailing political winds but, if they are the stewards of the military they pride themselves in being, they have to consider their impact on recruitment and retention. The biggest influence on a person joining the military is a family connection to the service, but if your father or brother tells you it’s all about woke indoctrination and not patriotism, adventure, and testing yourself – the things that attract an 18-year-old – the services, which already draw from a shrinking talent pool will be in even more trouble.

And if conservatives believe they are the targets of the Pentagon’s purity purge that will compound recruiting and retention woes as most recruits come from areas that leaned red in recent elections.

Leftists will exploit the military and move on, but Middle America, which is the foundation for recruiting and a strong national defense, will be disenchanted with risking its childrens’ lives for the woke brass, after it overlooked military officials’ ethical lapses or personal enrichment. From there it’s a short hop to an ambitious conservative politician getting elected – and re-elected – by making the case for giving the Pentagon a 10% haircut (to start) and using it as the bill-payer for more popular programs instead of weapons that don’t work, and pointless wars in places that don’t matter.

Military leaders love to go on and on about morality and ethics, but this isn’t a think tank seminar or a bull session at the Officer’s Club, its life with real consequences. If they are really worthy of the young man and women they command, they must reject any accommodation with CRT ideologues – who hate them – so they can build trust with Middle America.

And its not just the right thing to do, it’s the practical thing to do: Senator Tom Cotton wants Congress to probe the views of all senior officers to ensure “our flag officers subscribe to those very basic principles that are outlined in our Declaration [of Independence] or in King’s Dream speech,” Not every senior officer is ready for prime time so, if the Pentagon doesn’t want to deal with the televised debacles – and rejected nominations – that will ensue, it better reaffirm its compact with Middle America ASAP.

Its’s decision time, gentlemen.

U.S. Bases in Central Asia: Where Will They Go?

05/05/2021

The U.S. is attempting to evacuate its troops and contractors from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021, the 20th anniversary of the al-Qaeda attacks.

American officials say they will keep the ability to collect intelligence and strike against terrorist threats to the U.S. by locating facilities and equipment in nearby countries.

Negotiations to locate American military and intelligence units in Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbors will be difficult.

The neighbors will have to live with an Afghanistan in which the Taliban assume a larger role, probably within the country's governing institutions, and hosting foreign forces will complicate bilateral relations.

So, what's in it for them?

Of the five Central Asian countries only two are likely fits for U.S. designs, so let's eliminate the outliers.

Kazakhstan has good relations with the U.S., and many airfields, but a mission to Afghanistan requires a lengthy overflight of another Central Asian country, Iran, or China. The country also has a busy airspace, a downside for the U.S. is concerned as its aerial operations may not stay secret.

As Kazakhstan borders Russia the presence of U.S. military and intelligence units will raise regional tensions and set Nur-Sultan between Moscow and Washington. A better approach for the U.S. is to increase economic engagement with Kazakhstan to give it room to flex between the big powers. U.S. investment has lagged that of China, which has notched up 55 projects worth \$27.6 billion, half in oil and natural gas.

If Washington is serious about its new Central Asia Investment Partnership with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan we may see a region that attracts investment and, with it, interest by other governments in local sovereignty and economic prosperity, marquee goals of the United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025.

Turkmenistan has an almost 500 mile border with Afghanistan but the natural gas-rich country follows a policy of "permanent neutrality" which has been recognized by a UN special resolution, so it is unavailable.

The Kyrgyz Republic hosted a "transit center" at Manas International Airport from 2001 to 2014 that was used to support U.S. operations in Afghanistan. But relations were fraught with allegations of irregularities in U.S. fuel contracting, the killing of a local civilian, and rumors of fuel dumping. U.S.-Kyrgyz relations may have improved in the interim but Bishkek may steer clear of openly cooperating with the U.S.

That leaves Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, both of which border Afghanistan, which avoids third-country overflight to targets in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan's relations with the U.S. have improved since the election of the reforming president Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The country participates in U.S.-sponsored military training and counterdrug efforts, but its official policy is to not join military blocs, host foreign military bases, or deploy its troops abroad.

Uzbekistan has modern airfields at Tashkent and Navoi, but Tashkent is the capital city airport and Manas is an international cargo hub, so they both lack anonymity. The U.S. previously used the military airfield at Karshi-Khanabad in 2001-2005 but will be reluctant to return after numerous reports of illnesses due to environmental pollution. The Termez airport is near the border with and is used by Germany to resupply its contingent in Afghanistan but it's a big step from hosting cargo flights to hosting American spying and riding.

The border with Afghanistan is short – only 89 miles – and is fortified and patrolled to deter smugglers which makes it hard for foreign forces to operate unilaterally.

Tajikistan obviously believes in being a friend to all as it hosts military bases of Russia, China, and India. Iran and Tajikistan have discussed joint measures against “against terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking and organized crime,” and they recently announced a military cooperation agreement. The country is a major drug trafficking corridor and a U.S. presence could enhance ongoing counternarcotic measures in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, but the field may be too crowded with opposing intelligence services for Washington’s comfort.

The border with Afghanistan is an infiltrator’s dream – sparse and over 800 miles long – but well used by alert smugglers, and the Russians, Chinese, and Indians are likely watching it.

Uzbekistan understands “good fences make good neighbors” but also has actively participated in developing Afghan by building a rail line from Hairatan on the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan border to Mazar-i-Sharif, training young Afghans through the Educational Center for Training Afghan Citizens in Termez, and exporting electricity to Afghanistan at a reduced price.

Tashkent hosted a Taliban delegation in 2018 and encouraged negotiations with the Kabul government, and may want to avoid facilitating belligerency against the Taliban.

Tajikistan, which doesn’t have Uzbekistan’s resources, is securing itself by seeking foreign patrons and may be amenable to a U.S. offer as it seeks American financial aid and a counterweight to Russia, China, and India.

These objects of America’s attentions will have to consider Washington’s notoriously short attention span, and the fact that a commitment by the executive branch doesn’t commit the U.S. Congress, which can adjust the foreign policy by control of the appropriations process or by legislation mandating economic sanctions of individuals, organizations, and countries.

The increase in Chinese investment in the region via the Belt and Road Initiative has exposed Central Asia to Beijing’s approach to interstate relations via infrastructure. China may not try to checkmate the U.S. move to local facilities, but it offers an alternative model of engagement. Beijing is a tough negotiator and makes its policy preferences clear but its goal is to invest in changed physical infrastructure, while the U.S. is perceived as wanting to change society. The latter is a sensitive issue as Central Asia is finally free of some else’s empires: first Persian, then Russian, and latterly Soviet.

One of the more vexing issues is the effect of U.S. military flight operations in the region.

Will the local governments have any control over the timing and targets of the U.S. activity?

Or a veto?

Then there’s the matter of sharing the intelligence collected with the hosts.

And the status of forces agreement that governs the law that applies to foreign military, foreign civilians, and contractors.

Local governments will want to avoid military operations that may cause civil aviation carriers transiting the region to reroute as this will cost them overflight fees. Then there's the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) warning about Afghanistan: "EXERCISE EXTREME CAUTION WHEN FLYING INTO, OUT OF, WITHIN, OR OVER THE KABUL FLIGHT INFORMATION REGION." (Yes, the FAA communicates in all caps.) Will the extension of U.S. military operations into their territory increase extend the risk to civil aviation?

The Central Asian sky looks pretty uncrowded but there's little room to maneuver. Afghan airspace to the south is hazardous and Russia to the north usually limits overflight rights to one airline per country, so any restrictions on civil aviation will narrow the East-West funnel, possibly causing shippers to seek other routes or modes of transport. In other words, its money out of someone's pocket.

Its time for "Let's Make a Deal" as Washington attempts to hang onto its presence in the region and stays focused on eliminating Afghanistan as a terror threat to the U.S. – even though the 9/11 operation was planned in Hamburg, Germany.

There's no local animosity towards the U.S. (though the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks previously showed the Americans the door) but it's obvious that Washington's prognostications of success in Afghanistan were just talk. And China has shown it's possible to do a deal with a practical big power that doesn't include mandated social engineering.

Though China and Russia have a better image than the U.S., America can make headway by ensuring its latest military enterprise doesn't damage local economic prospects or make host nations targets for reprisals by Afghan-based extremists, while respecting local culture and sovereignty.

Can the U.S. deliver when it's on the back foot?

The S-400 Takes Aim at U.S. Alliances

04/02/2021

The Russian S-400 missile system is good at shooting down enemy aircraft. It's also proficient at endangering America's relationships with allies.

The S-400 Triumf is an air defense missile system that can engage "aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), and ballistic and cruise missiles, within the range of 400km at an altitude of up to 30km. The system can simultaneously engage 36 targets." It is in service in Russia, has been sold to Belarus, China, Turkey, and Algeria, and deployed to Syria.

The S-400 was in the news when the U.S. sanctioned NATO ally Turkey for buying the system. Starting in 2009, the U.S. and Turkey made several attempts to negotiate the sale of the competing Patriot air defense system, but in 2017 Turkey bought the S-400 instead. The Russian effort was no doubt helped by Putin's support of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after the attempted coup in 2016, while the Americans remained silent.

The U.S. warned Turkey that buying the S-400 would trigger sanctions but Turkey activated the system and, in December 2020, the U.S. sanctioned Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries, its president,

and other top officers. Previously in response to the S-400 purchase, the U.S. expelled Turkey from the F-35 combat aircraft program, and terminated F-35 contracts with Turkish defense firms.

India also bought the S-400 and was warned that this could trigger sanctions. (The system will be delivered in late 2021.)

The warning comes as the U.S. wants India to help contain China as part of the “Quad” – the coalition of the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India. But India is also a longtime customer of Soviet and Russian equipment, and manufactures many Russian weapons under license. The U.S. wants India to shift from relying on Moscow to relying on Washington but India, in line with its heritage in the Non-Aligned Movement, probably prefers to rely on itself.

The U.S. has sold India arms, such as the AH-64 attack helicopter and Hellfire missiles, but Russia is India’s largest supplier. The U.S. has never sold India the biggest-ticket item, fixed-wing combat aircraft, though the Trump administration offered the F/A-18 fighter.

The interests of the U.S. are colliding with the desires of Turkey and India to reduce their dependence on the U.S. and Russia and become self-sufficient in arms production. They can develop their technology sector, become arms exporters, gain revenue, and turn sales into political influence à la America.

Also, Turkey and India want to reduce U.S. interference in their internal affairs and one solution is to buy from Russia, which only wants to discuss the payment schedule.

The U.S. is also concerned that if India and Turkey field American and Russian gear it will make the idea of the “mixed fleet” attractive and countries may spread purchases among Russia, China, Europe, and the U.S. The U.S. has reasonable concerns regarding equipment interoperability to facilitate joint operations, and the presence of Russian or Chinese trainers and technicians near U.S. equipment will present a challenge to secure U.S. technology.

Another U.S. concern is preserving high levels of arms sales, especially if the Biden administration reduces the defense budget to help deal with the national debt and deficit. The U.S. is the world’s leading arms exporter with a 37% market share and those sales are not just political leverage: they keep production lines running, reducing the cost of complete weapon systems and spare parts.

The U.S. will have to be creative as it tries to resolve conflicts with a NATO ally, and a country of 1.4 billion people that is skeptical of U.S. intentions.

The U.S. has cordial relations with India, which feels that a country of its size and with a surging technology sector should not be beholden to any supplier – American or Russian. India may be ready to be a member of the Quad, but may not want to sacrifice a decades-long relationship with Russia while it helps the U.S. in its competition with China, a policy you can describe as “the plumber pays you.”

On Turkey, compromise is needed. America’s political class hates Erdoğan, but if he vanishes tomorrow his successor is no more likely to surrender to the U.S. on the S-400. Turkey has received loans from China for the energy and transportation sector, and from the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank for COVID-19 relief, but it also lives at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, and the energy-rich eastern Mediterranean Sea. Turkey may not be too big

to fail, but relations between Washington and Ankara must be stabilized to pull Turkey away from Russia and China.

One solution may be a technical security team similar to what the U.S. uses to monitor Pakistan's U.S.-provided F-16 fighters to ensure the technology is secure, and that the aircraft is used as intended and isn't modified. A similar team in Turkey could be used to ensure the F-35's technology isn't compromised by the S-400.

Will the U.S. deal?

This week U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, "The United States won't force our allies into an 'us-or-them' choice with China." But will that indulgence extend to the lucrative defense contracting sector if a customer decides to buy equipment from Russia or China?

And the sanctions against Turkey may help competitor China score a significant arms sale to Pakistan, according to a Turkish government spokesman. The official claims the U.S. "blocked" the export of engines for the T-129 ATAK helicopter which may tip the sale in favor of China's Z-10 attack helicopter. There may be more to it than that but it won't matter if it gets retweeted often enough.

The politics will be more complicated in Washington, D.C. than in Ankara or New Delhi as the center of gravity for compromise is the sanctions-loving U.S. Congress. Congress will be reluctant to surrender its favorite foreign policy which will give Russia the opportunity to argue that U.S. sanctions are merely meant to promote U.S. business, and the U.S. has once again proved it has no respect for its purported allies.

Even if Moscow never sells another S-400 system the missile may still find its mark.

Will the Silicon Valley Mindset Help America Beat China in Space?

03/23/2021

Space has become the next frontier for geopolitical conflict between the U.S. and China.

America's adversary China has made significant investments in space infrastructure, weaponry, and commercial rockets with the intent to reverse American space supremacy in the coming decade. Unfortunately, the companies that NASA and the Pentagon are counting on most to safeguard America's interests in outer space appear unable to follow safety regulations that ensure safe testing.

SpaceX's three recent Starship rocket explosions are a textbook example of this a trend that may weaken the U.S. space industry. While accidents with test rockets are commonplace, SpaceX's Starship program has received scrutiny from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which revealed that SpaceX had launched its December test in violation of its FAA test license. The agency denied the company's request for a license waiver, but SpaceX proceeded to launch anyway, only to watch its SN8 test end in an enormous fireball.

SpaceX CEO Elon Musk responded to the FAA's concern with blistering criticism, going so far as to call its rules "broken" without acknowledging that some federal oversight is very much a critical part of ensuring that safe space flight can be a contributor to economic growth the national security of the United States.

According to a 2018 NASA investigation, the company may have lost a rocket in 2015 because of its use of a lower quality part "without adequate screening or testing...without regard to the manufacturer's recommendations for a 4:1 factor of safety...and without proper modeling or adequate load testing of the part under predicted flight conditions." In 2017, the Department of Defense (DoD) Inspector General found that the company had more significant nonconformities than any other contractor it inspected. The company responded by complaining about the FAA and engaging in a lawsuit with the Air Force that a court found had no merit.

If the U.S. space industry is to successfully compete with China, the federal government must enforce reasonable risk standards to ensure safety and reliability.

But SpaceX highlights a division in the space industry between space entrepreneurs like Elon Musk and the contractors that service NASA and the Pentagon.

"Upstart" billionaire entrepreneurs will accept more risk to get to market ahead of the competition, while the nation's more traditional national security contractors have only one customer — the federal government — that has no competition.

Private and public capital make different demands, and the SpaceX approach is conditioned by a desire to get its products to market to establish a dominant position and pay back its investors. The differing demands are also reflected in the approach to risk: the private sector tests to learn, but the government and its contractors test to demonstrate, especially to their overseers — the appropriations committees on the Hill, which don't want to be seen as bankrolling "failures."

This drives a rapid launch-to-learn process and an acceptance of risk that opposes SpaceX to its competitors, which will accept a lengthy development cycle to eliminate risk, e.g., NASA's Orion reusable space capsule that has been in development since 2006 and has had only six test flights.

There are also personality differences at play. Elon Musk smokes dope live on YouTube, tweets about Dogecoin, and counts space as just one of his several ventures, such as Tesla and The Boring Company. He is not exactly a button-down defense contractor. And he'll soon be joined by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who just announced he will be spending more time on his space venture, Blue Origin, as well as billionaire Richard Branson, who got his start running a record shop.

When the SpaceX space transportation service comes to the market, it will drive economic growth and contribute to America's national security. And the company's research and development achievements will help keep America in the forefront of space exploration.

But to ensure America's space supremacy over China and other rogue actors, the space entrepreneurs and the heritage companies need to collaborate to ensure the surety of future missions.

One approach may be cooperating on an agreed process to evaluate and report the cause(s) of accidents. At the moment, there is a stark difference in how the public learns what happened. For

example, SpaceX took six days to announce the cause of the failure of the recent SN10 mission, but it took NASA almost three years to report the cause of the SpaceX CRS-7 accident.

Collaboration between both parties will be shaped by the demands of each one's funders. Because private investors are involved, SpaceX has to quickly report the cause of an accident and the remedial action. But when the client is NASA and DoD, whose mission is to protect national security and satisfy congressional appropriators, it may be prudent to copy the approach of the National Transportation Safety Board, which provides an early, interim report of an accident, followed by an in-depth report that may take at least a year to complete and will be debated at public hearings.

Though each sector of the space industry feels the other doesn't "get it," they are both here to stay and they should grasp a shared responsibility to demonstrate their commitment to winning the new space race through engaging in safe, reliable space flight to face off the China threat.

Blackwater Pardons were the Right Call

01/08/2021

On September 16, 2007, seventeen Iraqi civilians died in a botched security operation by the private security company (PSC) Blackwater USA. On December 19, 2020, President Donald Trump pardoned the Blackwater guards, who were waiting appeal of their convictions.

Independent analysts concluded that the actions of the Blackwater team were unjustified. After a series of legal starts, stops, and reversals, four members of the Blackwater team were sentenced to prison for their actions; three were convicted of manslaughter and the fourth for first degree murder. Although there was shock and outrage from the U.S. and international commentariat, human rights groups, and the United Nations, the pardons were appropriate.

This wasn't a case of whether the accused committed homicide. They did, and an investigation by the U.S. Army determined those deaths were unjustified. The investigation and prosecution, however, were flawed, hijacked by seekers of "justice" and those opposed to Erik Prince and all his works.

In a desperate pursuit of its conception of justice, the U.S. government twisted the law to get convictions, proving that if a prosecutor decides you belong in jail, you're going to jail. Conversely, it often takes a politician, not the courts, to see that justice is done.

Under its contract with the U.S. State Department, Blackwater personnel directly participated in hostilities on a regular basis, but this a role reserved for military forces according to international law and U.S. Government directives and is among what are called "Inherently Governmental Functions." Unlike military forces, misconduct on the part of these civilians was not (at that time) accountable under military law. Although civilians were required to abide by the laws of the host nation, PSCs, including Blackwater, weren't subject to Iraqi law, either. Coalition Provisional Authority Order 17 stated that, instead, they were subject to legal proceedings by the "Parent State." In this case, that was U.S. government.

The problem was that State Department PSCs in Iraq in 2007 were not covered by the only statutory authority to bring alleged wrongdoers to trial, the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act (MEJA). MEJA only applies to persons under military authority while other statutes, including the Patriot Act

and the Special Maritime and Territorial Jurisdiction Act did not apply to the situation at Nisour Square. The Department of Justice elected to create the fiction that these State Department contractors were in Iraq supporting the Defense Department, despite contrary testimony by Gordon England, who was Deputy Secretary of Defense at the time of the incident.

Another problem was that initially, the only evidence the government had to build a case was the debriefings conducted by the State Department with the Blackwater team members. These debriefings were compulsory, submitted under conditions of immunity, meaning that they were protected under the Fifth Amendment. But because the government violated the contractors' protections against self-incrimination, the courts initially dismissed the charges. Then-Vice President Joe Biden, who handled Obama administration policy for Iraq, promised Iraqi leaders the U.S. would appeal the dismissal of these charges. Subsequently, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, overturned the dismissal, and decided to allow the excluded statements as testimony.

Then there was the problem of evidence. The prosecution was never able to match any of the bullets collected at the scene to any of the weapons used by the Blackwater team. No manslaughter prosecution in the United States would be credible without proof that bullets fired at the scene could be matched to a shooter's firearm.

Despite these irregularities, and others involving suppression of exculpatory evidence and misuse of weapons charges, the four members of the Blackwater team were convicted...and had the sentences dismissed...and were retried...and were convicted again...which was again appealed.

The individuals are clearly responsible for unjustified homicide. The guilty must be punished, but we cannot use unjust means to get a desired result. Because of those unjust means to pursue justice, the Presidential pardon is justified, despite the bad optics. The usual suspects will claim that President Trump is condoning murder. The nuances of protecting individual rights against a legal system corrupted to produce a pre-determined result are difficult to follow. These issues may be unintelligible in other countries that do not have similar constitutional protections for their citizens. We find ourselves between Scylla and Charybdis.

And we ensured this won't happen again. All contractors working in a military contingency operation can now be tried by court-martial, but many places where U.S. Government contractors work are not defined as "contingency operations." A comprehensive, so called, "civilian extraterritorial jurisdiction act" has been stalled in Congress for about a decade.

The Presidential pardon was shocking to many, but it was necessary to preserve the rule of law. Hopefully, that shock will stimulate action to close the remaining gaps in accountability and, should a similar situation recur, ensure justice is swift and appropriate.

Christopher Mayer is a consultant on national security issues. He is a retired U.S. Army officer whose duties included policy, oversight, and accountability for private military and security contractors.

America Should Stand with France Against Radical Islam

12/17/2020

In September and October, France suffered three terror attacks that left two wounded and four dead. The French government said the attacks were motivated by radical Islam. (Since 2001, France has suffered 270 deaths due to Islamist violence.)

After the last attack, in Nice, French president Emmanuel Macron declared, “France is under attack” and that France would “not give in to terrorism.” Macron announced the state would take strong action against Islamist influence, most notably calling on French imams to agree to a “charter of republican values” that states “in black and white” that Islam is a religion and not a political movement, and prohibits “foreign interference” in Muslim groups.

Macron doubled the number of security personnel deployed along France’s borders and announced a bill that would restrict home-schooling and enable harsh penalties for those who intimidate officials on religious grounds. He also called for greater counter-terror cooperation among European Union (EU) governments, an intensified fight against terrorist propaganda, and a rethink of the open-border Schengen arrangements.

Though Macron says radical Islamism is “a political ideology which distorts the Muslim religion by twisting its scriptures” Muslim leaders from other countries piled on. His most notable critics were former playboy and current Pakistan prime minister, Imran Khan, and Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Erdoğan helpfully suggested Macron needed “mental checks” which is pretty rich as the country Erdoğan is privileged to lead was organized by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk with France’s *laïcité* (secularism) as a model. The United Arab Emirates, though, supported Macron and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs said, “You must listen to what Macron actually said in his speech. He does not want to isolate Muslims in the West, and he is absolutely right.”

Other say France doesn’t understand the nature of radicalization or that Macron’s goal is really heading off Marine Le Pen, his likely rival in the 2022 election. Troubling, though, is the silence from other European capitals, though Macron did get a tweet of support from Mark Rutte, the Dutch Prime Minister. From London and Berlin...crickets.

The U.S. and France have different views of religion in the public square, and mock each other as a national pastime, but Paris has concerns that converge with Washington’s.

The U.S. has an interest in France’s success in the fight against Islamists. The two countries have a robust intelligence sharing relationship, and the U.S. needn’t meddle in France’s internal affairs, but Washington can recommit to helping its oldest ally – and contribute to the West’s security – by aligning some regional military moves with Paris.

France pulls its weight in security matters. It maintains an active nuclear deterrence force, recently announced it would buy a new nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, deployed its navy to the eastern Mediterranean Sea in response to Turkey’s incursions into Greek and Cypriot waters, and is the key partner of U.S. counter-terrorism operations in West Africa (where the U.S. provides airlift, aerial refueling, and intelligence sharing).

France maintains a military presence in Francophone Africa to ensure stability in former colonies and facilitate Macron's conception of Europe and Africa as one region, and which calls for a "Europe that is much more geopolitically united and involves Africa as a partner, on an entirely equal footing."

Much of the filigree of Macron's Africa policy isn't a concern of the U.S., but the counterterror mission is where continued American involvement will pay off for both parties (and Africa!)

Where is the mission?

It is largely in the Sahel, the transition zone between the Saharan desert to the North and, to the South, the tropical savannah that runs East to West and, according to Peter Zeihan, "It is here, in the Sahel, that the Americans will fight their final battles in the War on Terror."

In Africa, the U.S. operates from 27 bases of varying permanence, most in the Sahel. France is also there, with most of its forces to the North of the U.S. belt of bases. It also operates naval patrols in the Gulf of Guinea and has a large presence in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa.

France has committed about 5,000 troops to its effort, Operation Barkhane, which commenced in 2014 and is headquartered in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad. (The United Kingdom and Estonia have also made small troop contributions.) The U.S. has from 5,000 to 6,000 troops in Africa on any given day, a number which likely doesn't include classified missions or CIA paramilitaries.

French forces, which operate with the G5 Sahel Joint Force – troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – are mostly conducting counterterrorism (CT) operations. The U.S. effort is more board-gauge with much of its effort focused not only on the camera-ready CT mission but on helping African forces build skills in logistics, communications, and intelligence analysis. The most important aspect of the U.S. mission is "security sector assistance" which promotes a sense of military professionalism that respects the rule of law and civilian control of the military and recognizes that terrorism can't be quelled by stick alone.

In Africa, France, the "reluctant gendarme," has a rep for operating unilaterally and the local governments are unsure of the level of U.S. commitment. In 2019, the Pentagon said it would reduce troop levels in Africa and in December the Pentagon announced a redeployment 700 troops from Somalia to outside of east Africa (but still on the continent). Last, the U.S. is reducing number of defense attachés in West Africa which will reduce day-to-day access to host nation decision makers.

It is pretty plain the locals want to see a greater U.S. focus on the region. West African leaders warned against a 2019 troop cut and, in the words of Senegal's president Macky Sall, "It would be a mistake, and it would be very misunderstood by Africans."

Washington has made a start: the U.S. Army reorganized its forces for Europe and Africa under one commander; and the Congress boosted the budget of the U.S. Africa Command. Now the Biden administration should follow up and make a firm, and public, commitment to the Africa mission, work more closely with France, and ensure the U.S. and France aren't working at cross-purposes with the UN peacekeeping missions on the continent.

And the sooner they get started the better, as militant Islamist activity in Africa has doubled from 2013 to 2019, and the greatest increase in violent extremist activity in 2019 was in the Sahel.

A U.S. commitment won't fix France's domestic terrorism problem, which is partly due to a failure to integrate Muslim immigrants into French society, though others have said France's *laïcité* is an 18th century article of faith that "cannot remain the sole guide to human co-existence." (Those same guys probably aren't interested in likewise critiquing some well-known 7th century articles of faith but let's leave that to the French to work through.)

That said, Macron's sit-down with the French imams gave them political standing they hadn't earned they aren't representative of the larger French Muslim community and disaffected young Muslims the government needs to reach aren't hanging around their mosques.

U.S. support of the Africa mission may bolster France in intra-EU matters, but who would you rather have leading Europe? Germany? If you're Russian leader Vladimir Putin you do, as he can always count on Germany's influential [Putinverstehers](#), Putin explainers, to lobby for the Kremlin. Exhibit A if you want to see real "Russia collusion" is [Gerhard Schroeder](#), the former German chancellor and now head of the supervisory board of the Russian-controlled NordStream 2 gas pipeline consortium.

These guys are heirs to a 19th century tradition that has a fascination with "uncivilized" Russia and "saw in both the Russians and Germans at the beginning of the 20th century a healthy contrast to the rationalist, materialist-oriented West." This is the mythologizing and woolly philosophizing that got Germany (and Europe) in so much trouble once before – and is why we now have NATO and the EU.

Germany is a useful provider of hotel services to support U.S. operations in Europe, Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East, but it's not a full partner in the sense that it can "fight tonight." Germany's continuing hangover from World War II, the influence of the Russia lobby, and its abysmal military readiness rate – with no reversal in sight – limits its usefulness to the U.S. as a partner for military missions anywhere and security sector assistance in Africa.

The incoming Biden administration probably has big plans for reinvigorating America's interventionist streak in places like Syria, but a commitment to the low-cost, high-payoff Africa mission – in coordination with France – will help stanch Islamist terror in Africa, back up America's oldest ally, and contribute to building strong government institutions in countries that welcome America's assistance.

Military Officers and Politics: Just say No

10/25/2020

Proving that old soldiers never simply fade away, many of America's retired generals and admirals recently voiced their support for presidential candidates [Donald Trump](#) or [Joe Biden](#).

And in an interesting turn, Stanley McChrystal who commanded NATO forces in Afghanistan, and who resigned after a media report that he mocked then-vice president Joe Biden, announced he will endorse Joe Biden for president.

Does this mean he hates President Trump or loves Joe Biden? He may not be sure himself, but he said he agonized over it, though his rationale – that the Obama administration had a better staff process – ignores the results of that process: a campaign in Afghanistan where NATO forces "underperformed" to put it politely.

The political level is sure about one thing, though: it's nice to have ranks of retired military leaders ready to testify to a candidate's readiness for that 3 AM phone call.

American military officers have always had political influence and thirteen general officers have become president, but many of Trump's military critics are coming off losing seasons in Iraq and Afghanistan, unlike Eisenhower who defeated Nazi Germany and Grant who commanded the forces that preserved the Union.

Previous generation of commanders who defeated America's enemies, men like George Marshall, Omar Bradley, Chester Nimitz, and Mark Clark, respected American institutions and, with the exception of Douglas MacArthur, avoided public attacks on the commander-in-chief. But they weren't all silent. Matthew Ridgway, James Gavin, and David Shoup, successful combat leaders, opposed the Vietnam conflict and said so to President Lyndon Johnson – but they also avoided the campaign trail.

Some commanders' words illustrate where we are today.

Nimitz, speaking of those who died in the battle for the Pacific said, "To them we have a solemn obligation, the obligation to ensure that their sacrifice will help to make this a better and safer world in which to live." McChrystal, speaking about the U.S. effort in Afghanistan offered, "If we put more troops in there and we fight forever, that's not a good outcome either. I'm not sure what [is] the right answer. My best suggestion is to keep a limited number of forces there and just kind of muddle along and see what we can do."

How did we get here?

It goes back to 1988 when P.X. Kelly, a former commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, endorsed George H.W. Bush for president. Kelly was followed in 1992 by William Crowe, the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who endorsed Bill Clinton and then served (was rewarded?) as Clinton's ambassador to the United Kingdom.

And so on, until the last election when we saw Michael Flynn leading the "Lock her up" cheer at the 2016 Republican National Convention, and John Allen making a speech in support of Hillary Clinton at the 2016 Democratic National Convention.

And intemperate remarks like Bill McRaven's "Our republic is under attack from the president" go a long way to color elected officials' view of the value of advice from military leaders.

These officers may not understand that their new identity – a "Clinton admiral" or a "Trump general" – can't be shed like old clothes.

Any future attempts to give disinterested military advice will be scrutinized for deviations from their patron's policies. And their new friends, for whom nothing happens outside a political context, will be ready to exploit even a battlefield tragedy for political gain.

What officers eventually learn is: Politics is warfare, but without all the rules; and "norms" are what we did yesterday.

The military is hierarchical and institutional, values shared experience, and presents itself as apolitical. It makes decisions via deliberative, iterative processes, and for good reason: to ensure victory in

warfare, the ultimate high-risk activity. On the other hand, it has the luxury of not having to present itself to the voters at regular intervals to renew its mandate.

Trump is impulsive, improvisational, personalized, and hyper-political. He allegedly called military leaders, who are prideful men, “losers” and “dopes and babies.” And Trump, being a businessman, understands “sunk cost,” that you walk away from a failing project – like Afghanistan – unlike military leaders who talk of “honoring the sacrifice” of the dead troops by staying in the fight.

And, uncomfortably for the military (and the civil service), what counts now isn’t an official’s *political intent* but the *political effect of his actions*.

The continued involvement of retired senior officers in politics may incentivize politicians to get more involved in the process of promoting generals and admirals.

Secretary of the Navy John Lehman (1981-1987) exercised hands-on involvement in the promotion process, but after the Reagan administration the military reasserted its primacy in the process.

But there’s nothing to stop a future service secretary, a political appointee, actively screening the selectees before he sends the list to the Secretary of Defense, another political appointee, for transmission to the President.

Once the list of selectees lands at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue the eager beavers in the presidential personnel office might think they can improve their boss’s fortunes by conducting their own scrub, maybe with some interviews thrown in for good measure, before sending the names to the Senate for confirmation.

If this was to happen in a second Trump term the Senate Democrats would freak out – but they’d remember how it was done.

But this doesn’t have to happen.

The generals and admirals must police their ranks so the country’s accountable political leaders will never have to wonder if the officer they are talking to will endorse the opposition at the next national political convention.

Americans consider warfare a Pass-Fail pursuit and the military is playing a weak hand after the debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan as few in command above the tactical level can honestly claim a passing grade. (Civilian officials also made many bad decisions that contributed to the disasters, but it takes more than 280 characters to explain that.)

Public naming and shaming may be required so wayward officers understand they can either run for office and submit to a detailed examination of their record, or honor the tradition of generals Ridgway, Gavin, and Shoup who continued their service to America by providing quiet and influential advice and counsel to elected leaders and the public.

If that fails, the responses of the political level might be:

- 1) More closely manage the senior officer promotion process. This will be critical for the officer corps if an administration decides the behavior of retired officers is a barometer of active duty sentiment and that it must get the potential problem children out the door soonest.
- 2) Add civilian officials to the staffs of senior military officers;
- 3) Isolate “the brass” by severing the connection in the minds of the voters between them and “a strong national defense” and “the welfare of the troops.”

The Fight Against China’s Theft of Space Technology

10/03/2020

As Politico outlined, “the NASA Authorization Act of 2019 was introduced in the Senate in November to set policy for the space agency, including extending government operations on the International Space Station to 2030 and supporting NASA’s long-term objective to get to Mars.”

Senator Cory Gardner (R-Colo.) introduced two amendments to the Act.

Gardner issued the Amendments, which were approved by the Senate Commerce Committee, to prevent China from gaining an unfair advantage over the U.S. through illicit means.

The first amendment orders the Comptroller General of the United States to carry out a review of contracts with entities associated with the People’s Republic of China.

The second amendment requires the NASA Administrator to take into account “issues related to contracting with entities receiving assistance from or affiliated with the People’s Republic of China.”

These amendments are an expression and continuation of Congress’s actions in this area since 2011.

Origin of the Original Ban

In April 2011, Congress banned NASA from engaging in bilateral agreements and coordination with China.

As stated under Public Law 112-10, Sec. 1340:

(a) None of the funds made available by this division may be used for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration or the Office of Science and Technology Policy to develop, design, plan, promulgate, implement, or execute a bilateral policy, program, order, or contract of any kind to participate, collaborate, or coordinate bilaterally in any way with China or any Chinese-owned company unless such activities are specifically authorized by a law enacted after the date of enactment of this division.

(b) The limitation in subsection (a) shall also apply to any funds used to effectuate the hosting of official Chinese visitors at facilities belonging to or utilized by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration

But the threat from China has increased in the intervening years, so Congress should act again; hence the Gardner amendments.

In December 2018, the Justice Department charged Chinese hackers for conducting a 12-year government sponsored campaign to steal data from at least 45 U.S. companies or government agencies, including NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and Goddard Space Flight Center.

And Chinese hackers have also been implicated in the theft of American citizens' personal information from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and the Equifax credit reporting agency.

What's more, China has increased opportunities to gain access to U.S. space technology.

In 2012, Northrop Grumman issued an extensive report examining the Chinese government's effort to further develop and centralize information warfare and cyber espionage capabilities.

China's focus on information warfare was to level the playing field with Western powers.

In 2018, the Chinese clone of the Northrop Grumman X-47B drone debuted at the Zhuhai 2018 Airshow.

Tesla, a company tied closely to NASA contractor SpaceX because of their shared CEO, counts the Chinese Internet giant Tencent, that has been accused of illegal data collection, as a corporate advisor.

Tesla and SpaceX share several directors, and their CEO frequently meets with representatives of the Chinese government.

Chinese firms must follow the orders of the Chinese security services to target American technology.

It would be reckless to depend on the assurances of any Chinese private citizen in technology security matters.

Senator Gardner's amendments are a needed refreshment of the U.S. effort to safeguard its technology from theft by China's communist regime.

Ensuring Reliability in the Era of Private Space Exploration

06/23/2020

On January 27th, 1967, on the cusp of launching the United States to the forefront of the space race, tragedy struck when an electrical fire killed three American astronauts as they prepared for the Apollo 1 mission. The disaster led to a significant overhaul of capsule design, material selection, and

safety protocol. From the disaster, however, came a more reliable space agency that landed men on the moon only two years later.

Now, after decades of leading America's charge into space, NASA has begun to accept private sector participation in space travel and exploration.

The recent launch of astronauts on the SpaceX Crew Dragon spacecraft demonstrates private companies possess the capacity to move the industry forward.

But without an unwavering commitment to safety, they could delay or impede the private sector's future contributions to the exploration and economic exploitation of outer space.

Today, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and other space entrepreneurs are climbing the steep learning curve of spaceflight, just as NASA did in the years leading up to that historic day in 1969. The day before its successful Crew Dragon launch, the SpaceX Starship prototype exploded on a Texas launch pad. Bezos' Blue Origin has also experienced several mishaps, including numerous explosions of its rockets.

The complications NASA faced in the Sixties demonstrate how in the business of launching rockets, there is no avoiding early-stage mistakes.

However, today's contractors must prioritize reliability over speed and cost-cutting, assessing and addressing each error as carefully as NASA did after Apollo 1.

The U.S. is no longer in a national security battle with the Soviet Union, so these companies' tolerance for failure should be lower than it was in the Cold War.

But for all of the great potential that SpaceX and its cohort have demonstrated, their underplaying of the importance of quality control remains a sticking point of concern they must correct.

The recent SpaceX explosion in Texas helps to demonstrate this point, but a look backwards illuminates it further.

In 2018, for example, NASA investigators discovered that a 2015 SpaceX rocket explosion occurred because of the company's use of an industrial grade, as opposed to aerospace grade, part without proper screening or testing or abiding to the manufacturer's 4:1 safety recommendations for using that part.

SpaceX has experienced failures in the years since this incident, so is it continuing to rush ahead in its pursuit to commercialize space?

Free marketers may applaud the rapid approach SpaceX and other private spaceflight companies have taken at this early point in their histories. A government monopoly on launches and decades of generous congressional appropriations to favored contractors kept entrepreneurs out of the marketplace until recently, so they may feel the need to make up for lost time.

But this rushed approach, while understandable, may be contributing to mixed results.

NASA's inattention to reliability after the 1976 Apollo-Soyuz mission led to the Space Shuttle failures of 1986 and 2003, and it realized it had to revive its earlier safety-first practices. Today's private spaceflight companies must accept the same lesson: saving lives must always come before saving time.

The future of space travel lies in its commercialization.

Making our economy multi-planetary will bring endless resources and opportunities to the billions who inhabit our planet, but NASA and the Defense Department must ensure that all the contractors drive slowly and cautiously towards that goal. The government has an ally in their project: the insurance industry, which will reward safe operators and refuse to cover unsafe ones. Insurers will do more to ensure safe spaceflight than an army of bureaucrats, armed with checklists but no personal money at risk, ever will.

When selecting the contractors for its missions, the government must always ensure they are taking all the steps necessary to prevent failure.

Cautious early steps will build a foundation for a robust private space sector in the future.

Commercial Aviation in a Post-COVID-19 Future: The Case of Washington DC's Dulles Airport

04/23/2020

Washington Dulles International Airport is for many people in the Washington, D.C. area the "hometown" airport, though it is also a major airport for international business travelers and has welcomed innumerable immigrants who chose to make their life in America.

The airport opened in 1962 and showcases a visually impressive terminal designed by renowned architect Eero Saarinen.

Approaching 60 years of age, Dulles is still a very efficient airport for aircraft operations, but much less so for passengers at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic will likely impose an entirely different set of requirements.

The [recovery](#) of air travel may take to 2025 and the airport may be a different place with fewer flights using newer aircraft, served by airlines offering fewer amenities but a focus on safe, expeditious travel with minimal frills. The terminal itself may be less about amenities and an "experience" than about helping passengers get quickly from point A to point B.

How will this happen?

The first priority in aviation is safety and, in a financial downturn, the airport will want to ensure safety is not compromised.

Operating funds will likely be prioritized for upkeep of the runways and taxiways, communications and navigation systems, and the fuel farm that stores over 8 million gallons.

In 2019, [over 12 million](#) passengers departed Dulles. If the airport is required to medically screen departing travelers, over 12 million exams must be done quickly and accurately while maintaining social distancing, which is not what an airport terminal is about.

For example, Emirates Airline has started [thermal screening](#) of all passengers traveling from Dubai to the U.S.

If something similar becomes standard practice, the travel industry will have to work with Dulles and the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority to devise best practices to keep unhealthy people off commercial aircraft.

Unfortunately, the terminal layout at Dulles does not easily lend itself to that effort.

A slow recovery of the aviation sector will be bad for the airlines but may allow Dulles time to find a solution that won't add that increment of time that discourages potential travelers.

The Dulles departure gates are empty, but the airlines haven't parked the aircraft in the desert. The airlines have a full schedule of cleaning and [maintaining](#) the systems such as the engines and landing gear to ensure they don't deteriorate.

It's a substantial cost when there's not much revenue in sight, so given the collapse in jet fuel prices, the airlines may delay the retirement of some older, less fuel-efficient aircraft to save cash.

And whatever the age of the aircraft that future Dulles traveler alights, he or she may find the airlines made some changes, some for financial reasons, some for health reasons, and some of them stuff they always wanted to do but can now blame on COVID-19.

The traveler will note there are no installed entertainment devices, but free Wi-Fi is available. Masks are mandatory, which isn't an issue if there's no meal or beverage service.

No food service will reduce costs and flight attendant contact with passengers – now a good thing – and will reduce weight, giving the airlines a fuel saving.

There'll be fewer frequent flyer awards, as well as fewer award travel seats.

The airlines will strictly limit carry-on baggage to minimize loading times and complexity, and may rigorously enforce the overweight passenger policy, though they may stop reducing "seat pitch" to squeeze in any more passengers.

The airlines may find "cleanest aircraft" is as big a selling point as on-time performance.

Fewer flights will mean less operating revenue for the airport from landing fees, and concession fees from the hotel, rental car agencies, gas station, parking garage and parking lot operator, and food service outlets in the terminal.

If people employed by businesses located at the airport elect to work from home there will be a consolidation of space in the airport office buildings, reducing rental income.

The airport should work with the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to refine security protocols so medical screening plus security screening doesn't drive away business.

Without much ado, TSA changed the [3-1-1 liquids rule](#) to allow 12-ounce bottles of hand sanitizer, so the airport should insist on a re-examination of other passenger screening rules.

And there's always the possibility of hiring a [private firm](#) to do security screening.

There are significant operational and financial challenges facing both the airport and the airlines.

Flexibility, innovative thinking, and a "must do" attitude will hopefully prevail.

The National Security Cost of Blue Origin's Bid Protest

01/12/2020

The Air Force has been forced to change the procurement strategy of one of its flagship initiatives, due to one unsatisfied competitor, Blue Origin, LLC.

On November 21, 2019, the U.S. Air Force announced that it would change the selection process for the National Security Space Launch (NSSL) program. This decision came after Blue Origin, funded by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, filed a protest that was sustained by the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

Blue Origin complained: the second phase of the NSSL program "contains unclear and ambiguous selection criteria" and "unnecessarily restricts competition by awarding exclusive five-year contracts to only two providers."

The GAO upheld only the complaint regarding the selection criteria, stating that it "does not provide a reasonable, common basis on which offerors will be expected to compete and have their proposals evaluated." The GAO rejected the other portions of the complaint, specifically the one relating to competition so, overall, the NSSL selection process is sound.

Not only is Blue Origin's complaint creating a headache for the NSSL program, it's also causing national security concerns for the United States.

The protest, and GAO's decision to sustain it, will further delay the NSSL program, leading to a greater dependence on Russian rocket technology at a time of increasing tension between Washington and Moscow.

According to the Defense Department, the Air Force's NSSL program does not have vague criteria, is not anti-competitive, and doesn't discriminate against particular competitors. Col. Robert Bongiovi,

director of the Launch Systems Enterprise Directorate at the Air Force Space and Missile Systems Center noted, “As with any RFP this size, we went through a couple of independent reviews. We’re acquisition experts and we work through these things to make sure we get it right before we release it.”

NSSL contenders SpaceX, Blue Origin, United Launch Alliance, and Northrup Grumman had the same opportunity to submit proposals.

However, Blue Origin took a dispute over a policy barring uncertified launch providers and ran with it, forcing the Air Force to play along.

Blue Origin’s tactic demonstrates the goal of the protest was to delay the contract award to give it time to complete its New Glenn launch vehicle by the new deadline—the end of 2020. The company effectively received an extension to finish the project and become competitive.

Now, with the Air Force retooling its selection effort to fix a non-existent problem, the NSSL program will undoubtedly face substantial delays—a serious setback for a vital national security program already operating under considerable time constraints.

Protests like these happen regularly in defense contracting and they are damaging to national security.

In this case, the Department of Defense (DoD) stated the protest would delay the NSSL program as much as 1-2 years.

As a result, the U.S. will be forced to continue to rely on Russian rocket engines past 2020, the year Congress mandated an end to U.S. reliance on Russian engines.

As a result, not only will America’s space capabilities be limited, it also threatens to compromise America’s defense by giving Russia leverage over America’s national security space launch program.

America must develop its spacefaring independence, and the NSSL program is our nation’s best effort to shed dependence on Russian rocket engines, specifically the RD-180. Phase 2 of the NSSL program is a critical step toward establishing domestic launch alternatives.

The Air Force has insisted that the program must remain on schedule, and failing to do so could harm America’s national security interests.

Blue Origin’s protest was about getting a do-over for its delayed development of the New Glenn rather than a legitimate concern about the integrity of the competitive process.

Why else file its protest at the last minute – on August 12, 2019 – the NSSL proposal deadline?

And Blue Origin’s outrage appears selective: it did not protest during the program’s first phase, when it received a \$500 million contract.

It would seem that, rather than objecting to the Air Force’s legitimate handling of the program, the company is attempting to benefit from the delays a protest would cause.

Specifically, a delay will allow Blue Origin more time to develop its fledgling launch vehicle to compete with the more established players.

For Blue Origin to complain it is a victim of an unfair process when the Air Force hasn't even decided on contractors demonstrates the complaint is a tactical move to wrong-foot the government.

Blue Origin's goals are: keep the earlier award of \$500 million, and complete its delayed development of New Glenn, a situation that should have the government wondering about the viability of that platform.

The protest and the subsequent delays will lead to a greater reliance on Russian space technology and, according to the DoD, will likely cause a one to two-year delay. And now that the delay has been sustained, there is certain to be even more controversy to slow down the process even more and prevent the NSSL from attaining its goal of decreasing reliance on Russia's space technology.

Given Russia's track record in the energy sector, where it has cut natural gas shipments to all of Europe over a price dispute with Ukraine, giving it a decisive role in the national security space launch program is heedless of America's increasing reliance on space for its national security.

Putting Space-X in Perspective

06/22/2019

On May 17, 2019, SpaceX filed a bid protest against the U.S. government in the Court of Federal Claims. The suit, which SpaceX requested be sealed (to protect proprietary information the company claims), coincides with the company's recent unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Air Force's Launch Service Agreement (LSA).

Nevertheless, on May 22, the details of the lawsuit were made public, despite SpaceX's protest to the contrary. The purpose of SpaceX's protest became clear: to undermine the Trump Administration's selection process for aerospace contracting.

The lawsuit follows another surprising revelation about SpaceX—they botched their own LSA proposal.

Late last year, SpaceX founder Elon Musk admitted that SpaceX “missed the mark” with its LSA launch bid. For SpaceX, their May 17 bid protest marks the first time the company has confessed to making a mistake in the bidding process.

But in spite of the company's own contract mismanagement, SpaceX is protesting the government's LSA decision anyway.

Clearly, the company's decision to file suit against the government undercuts the administration's efforts to secure America's financial and national security interests and should be quickly dismissed.

This follows on the heels of SpaceX's recent decision to file (and later withdraw) a bid protest when it failed to win a NASA contract to launch a science mission to visit several Trojan asteroids in the same

orbit around the sun as Jupiter. If anything, it demonstrates the aerospace firm refuses to take responsibility for its failures and always seeks a do-over by interfering with the government's selection process.

Privately-held SpaceX is free to pursue its financial interests, but always blaming the other guys is pretty rich coming from a company that has ridden the subsidy train to its current position, and may benefit from a recent \$500 million earmark by HASC Chairman Representative Adam Smith (D-WA).

The Bid Protest and the LSA

The Air Force's LSA is perhaps today's most important aerospace program, with contracts totaling in the billions of dollars, so it makes sense that SpaceX wants in. SpaceX has expressed its concerns for its own financial well-being if it were not selected to participate in particular aerospace contracts.

So, its decision to protest the Air Force decision was clearly made out of corporate self-interest, rather than a genuine concern for America's national security infrastructure.

This isn't even the first time Musk's company has pulled this stunt. Indeed, SpaceX has a track record of interfering with the administration's agenda and has previously attempted to hobble the Air Force's selection process when it didn't get its way.

In February, SpaceX lobbied to slow the Launch Service Agreement when it wasn't selected to receive Air Force funding to modify its commercial rockets, so they meet national security mission requirements. I

nstead, the Air Force awarded funds to three other aerospace firms as part of a cost-sharing effort with industry—hardly an argument that the government has no viable options and that the taxpayer won't benefit from competition. SpaceX's case, advanced by members of the California Hill delegation, was that the program's timetable put SpaceX at a competitive disadvantage.

In reality, however, competitive circumstances always put *someone* at a disadvantage.

Given that SpaceX was left out of that phase of the program, and was unsuccessful at slowing it down, it makes sense that a complaint is SpaceX's next step toward obstructing the administration's agenda. This is despite the fact that the United States Air Force has indicated that the program must move forward without further delay.

Obviously, Musk is attempting to deflect blame from his company and toward the Trump Administration.

That is both irresponsible and wasteful.

Other Recent SpaceX Mistakes

SpaceX has a history of costing the taxpayer money when it fails to perform.

On April 20, 2019, SpaceX's Crew Dragon shuttle suffered a severe malfunction and exploded during testing. Despite leaked footage clearly showing the capsule explode,

SpaceX refused to admit as much and referred to the incident as an anomaly. It wasn't until over a week later that SpaceX acknowledged the Crew Dragon capsule was destroyed, but it did not take responsibility for the mistake.

This may lead to future launches being delayed as a result.

In early May, it was revealed that SpaceX is also having difficulty with the Crew Dragon's parachute system. In April, a test of the shuttle's parachutes found that they "did not operate properly," and that NASA "did not get the results" it wanted.

This has been an ongoing problem for SpaceX, which, despite apparent efforts, has yet to be resolved by the company.

SpaceX is a young company with real successes to its credit, but it doesn't understand the rules of the road for high-dollar aerospace contracting: use your losses to sharpen your subsequent attempts, and keep the taxpayer uppermost in your mind.

Time will tell if SpaceX can take the lessons of its adolescence into a productive adulthood.

America's Strategic Realists are Ignoring Fiscal Reality

01/08/2019

The report of the [National Defense Strategy Commission](#), "[Providing for the Common Defense](#)," provided an excellent analysis of the [National Defense Strategy](#)(NDS) but it skipped something important: *what it will all cost*.

That's a shame because the commission claims "America is very near the point of strategic insolvency," but overlooks the risk to America's fiscal solvency caused, paradoxically, by its defenders. Recently departed Defense Secretary James Mattis, and the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, advocated 3%-5% real increases to the defense budget but carefully avoided the t-word: trillion.

You get the feeling that above a certain level in the U.S. government the operating principle is: "[It was my understanding that there would be no math](#)."

Where does the defense budget come from?

Well, Congress [appropriates](#) the money, but where does the money come from? Mostly, the money comes from individuals and companies, as in payroll taxes and income taxes, or from domestic and overseas lenders, via the Treasury bill (T-bill) market, which has slowed of late. The biggest foreign buyers of T-bills are Japan and China. Lately Japan has [suspended](#) buying T-bills because of the rising expense of hedging U.S. investments due to the strong dollar; China just stopped buying, possibly from spending foreign currency reserves to defend the weak yuan, or maybe as retaliation for Trump's new tariffs on Chinese goods.

As the current and past administrations have cut income taxes for most Americans, overseas lenders have financed much of the national debt of [\\$21 trillion](#), and now hold [\\$6.21 trillion](#) in Treasury securities; Americans and the American government hold the rest. (The U.S. GDP is almost [\\$21 trillion](#) dollars.) If foreign demand for T-bills is weak, and income tax rates are being cut, the government must offer a higher interest rate to attract domestic buyers, further contributing to the budget deficit.

The Commission recommended “Congress increase the base defense budget at an average rate of three to five percent above inflation through the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP) and perhaps beyond.” How much money is that?

The [FYDP](#) is the Pentagon’s five-year financial plan, so let’s look at five and ten year horizons.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) [assumes](#) long-term inflation will be 2.3%, so the actual annual budget increases will be 5.3% and 7.3%. Pentagon spending was \$716 billion during the commission’s tenure, so we get:

- \$716 billion at 5.3% for 5 years = \$923 billion, a 29% increase
- \$716 billion at 5.3% for 10 years = \$1.202 trillion, a 68% increase
- \$716 billion at 7.3% for 5 years = \$1.017 billion, a 42% increase
- \$716 billion at 7.3% for 10 years = \$1.446 trillion, a 102% increase

That’s three trillion-dollar scenarios, and the fourth within a roundoff error of a trillion dollars. You can see why the commission was reluctant to Google “[compound interest calculator](#)”. And why did the commission bother to quote strategist Bernard Brodie, “Strategy wears a dollar sign,” then ignore what he said?

In a way, it is understandable why the commission demurred, saying only that the strategy “is not supported by adequate investments.” They are policy guys and the conversation they sincerely want America to have about the national security strategy would be drowned out by social media comments like “Retired generals and bureaucrats demand a trillion dollars for the Pentagon!”, though avoiding the topic just cedes the field to those killjoys at OMB.

America’s military is well-regarded but there is [less support](#) among the public for higher defense spending. The Pentagon’s argument for more money is undercut when allies like Germany – which is within range of Russian [Iskander missiles](#)– grudgingly spend 1.2% of GDP on defense, far [short of the 2%](#) of GDP that NATO members agreed to in 2014; the U.S. spends 3.6% of GDP on defense. And the Pentagon’s inability to pass a recent [financial audit](#)– that was first suggested in 1990 – further weakens its case for more money.

So, if foreigners don’t buy enough Treasury securities, other lenders demand a high interest rate for their money, and the politicians don’t want to raise taxes, what do we do?

President Trump has introduced a novel way to cut the defense budget: stop fighting! Pulling all troops out of Syria (Operation INHERENT RESOLVE) will [save](#) \$15 billion, and the drawdown of 7,000 troops from Afghanistan (Operation FREEDOM’S SENTINEL) will save much of that effort’s \$46 billion.

Democrat leaders in the incoming House of Representatives also have some ideas and have signaled they want to [cut the defense budget](#), and will demand dollar-for-dollar increases in social programs if defense spending rises. An unlikely coalition of the House Democrats and Republican deficit hawks may be who it takes to limit defense spending increases, welcome news to an American public weary of paying for a 18-year war in Afghanistan the U.S. is “[not winning](#)”, according to Secretary Mattis.

And if President Trump can work with the House Democrats and the GOP deficit hawks to restrain defense spending, he can point to cooperation across the aisle and budget savings, which may attract independent voters in the 2020 campaign.

In fact, Trump’s walk-back from his recent tweet that a \$716 billion defense budget was “[Crazy!](#)” to his recent request for a [\\$750 billion](#) budget will be the start of a negotiation with the Democrats that gets the Pentagon close to OMB’s preferred [\\$700 billion](#) level, a number that seems “big enough” once you travel beyond the Red Line.

And the recent [elevation](#) of OMB Director Mick Mulvaney to White House Chief of Staff will increase the chances the Pentagon’s budget will be reset with only inflation adjustments in the future.

A flat budget will put pressure on the DoD to make changes and aggressively seek economies. For example, military personnel costs have risen steadily since 2000, “even as the number of military personnel decreased 2 percent from 2000 to 2014,” [according](#) to the Congressional Budget Office, which ranks personnel costs as one of the three major contributors to the increasing cost of defense.

A good starting point might be merging the military’s three PX systems with the subsidized [commissary](#) system; a PX consolidation has been talked about since at least [1980](#). Or considering if we need PXs and commissaries at all, as most military bases have a Walmart or Costco nearby, and Amazon does business everywhere. We could give every soldier and sailor another hundred bucks a month in lieu of the brick and mortar benefit, then close the whole thing down.

The commission agrees that changes to the defense establishment are necessary, but... “We strongly agree that the Pentagon’s culture and way of doing business must be brought into the 21st century, yet it is unrealistic to expect that such reforms will yield significant resources for growth, especially within a time frame appropriate to meet the challenges posed by China and Russia.”

In the words of that keen observer of the human condition, Roseanne Roseannadanna, “[It’s always something! If it’s not one thing, it’s another!](#)”

By one estimate, the U.S. has been engaged in military conflict [93%](#) of the time between 1776 and 2015. Fighting is America’s natural state; we should be able to do two things at once.

But Congress will have to do more than complain and cut the budget. To start, multi-year defense budgets would relieve contractors’ planning uncertainty and reduce the cost of weapons systems. Giving DoD authority to spend [Operations and Maintenance](#) funds across several fiscal years will reduce budget turbulence and the “[use it or lose it](#)” mentality. Another round of [military base closings](#) will drive infrastructure savings, and [domestic content legislation](#) (the “Buy America Act”) should be reviewed (I bet they make pretty decent anchor chain in Mexico).

Instead of parroting the Pentagon’s wish for budget increase of 3%-5% above inflation to fund another round of “[great power competition](#)”, the commission missed the chance to explain how the nation’s

financial challenges will affect our strategic choices, and to discuss the opportunity costs of the proposed unprecedented spending levels.

The commission provided useful analysis of the deleterious effect of the inflexible Budget Control Act, but it failed to think strategically. General Omar Bradley's observation, "*Amateurs* talk strategy. Professionals talk *logistics*.", needs to be updated to include economics.

"Money plays" so the Pentagon must give the President and Congress a plan to live within its means, rather than the default setting of "all of the above". The Hill shares responsibility for the solution, but the effort starts on Boundary Channel Drive.

The cover graphic is from Bigstock:

Stock Photo ID: 372672631

Copyright: Dustin99