

War fatigue; Cyber attacks a serious problem; Poor, poor Putin; Whither the Pacific pivot;

RETIRED WORLD COP

In a major speech at West Point on how and where the US will—or most likely won't—intervene militarily in world affairs during the remainder of his presidency, Barack Obama pronounced the US out of the business of world policing. On his watch, the US will act militarily only if its citizens or interests are attacked “directly” and will resolutely avoid being drawn into any brewing wars, be they hot or cold.

Despite Russian tanks on the move, Obama made clear there will be no symbolic rebuttal from the US in the form of a major return of forces to Europe or a surge in defense spending. He specifically dismissed the notion of another Cold War and said terrorism—not aggressive nation-states—represents the biggest threat to Americans. Forces that directly combat terrorism will get special attention in defense spending during the rest of his tenure.

In spelling out the new American “restraint,” Obama indicated there are few transgressions that would cause the US to reverse the rapid shrinkage of the US military, funding for which is expected to be a trillion dollars less than originally planned during the 10 years ending in 2023. For the Air Force, this has meant the retirement of more than 500 aircraft in recent years, with another 400 or so proposed in the most recent defense budget.

Obama explained that in specific conflicts underway or threatened in Syria, Iran, Egypt, and Ukraine, the US will exercise its world leadership by first exhausting soft-power efforts to isolate aggressors through diplomacy, economic sanctions, and the pressure of international law.

The “hammer” of the US military is the best in the world, he said, but not every problem “is a nail.” Taking heavy-handed, precipitous military action in conflicts that should be solved by other means risks making “more enemies,” Obama asserted.

With the US economy continuing to struggle, Congress' unwillingness to repeal the sequester, and the nation's overall war fatigue, an initiative to sharply upgrade the armed forces to counter world peers is a tough sell.

SOFT POWER AND LAWFARE

Not only will the bar for invoking US military action be set to new heights, when the US does engage with force, Obama said, it will almost never do so unless it is part of a coalition of allies or regional partners. The instances where the US acts alone will be rare, he said, because unilateral

US action rarely produces lasting political results. However, he reserved the right of “just, necessary and effective” unilateral action, saying the US need never “ask permission” from the UN, NATO, or other countries to protect its people, homeland, or “way of life.”

The preference to resolve conflicts through peaceful means is not new for the former law professor; Obama has expressed this since long before becoming President. What was startling about his West Point speech, however, was the timing of the remarks. It had only been two months since Russia forcibly annexed Ukraine's Crimea and was openly



Photo by Aleksey Mikheyev

The Russians—shown here in a May live weapons exercise just 100 miles from the Ukraine border—claim to feel “robbed” and “plundered” by the West.

sponsoring, arming, and leading pro-Russian insurgents fostering military unrest in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, China has been stepping up its rhetoric and skirmishes with Asia-Pacific neighbors in more than half-a-dozen territorial disputes, warning the US to mind its own business about it all. Regarding these, Obama said, “We’re working to resolve [them] through international law.” A few months ago, China suddenly created an air defense identification zone around its coastline, demanding all aircraft entering it to check in with Chinese authorities and threatening intercept or worse of those who don’t get permission. The ADIZ overlaps similar zones declared by Japan and South Korea.

The US has “a serious problem with cyber attacks” from China and Obama said he hopes to “shape and enforce rules of the road to secure our networks and our citizens.” He didn’t mention that some of these cyber intrusions have been traced back to the Chinese military, and some have caused profound losses of sensitive data.

HITTING THE SNOOZE BUTTON

Russia's aggression toward former Soviet states "unnerves capitals in Europe" and China's "rise and military reach worries its neighbors," Obama admitted in the West Point speech, adding that "regional aggression that goes unchecked—whether in southern Ukraine or the South China Sea, or anywhere else in the world—will ultimately impact our allies and could draw in our military."

In explaining his moves in Ukraine during a marathon March press conference, Russian President Vladimir Putin voiced sympathy for all those ethnic Russians who, as the old Soviet Union broke up, "went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities." He suggested those new minorities may need to be rescued. Russia, he said, has been "robbed" and "plundered" by the West, and he ridiculed criticisms of Russia in the name of international law, saying the US has ignored those rules with its actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In March, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, speaking in Washington, declared Russia's Crimea grab "the gravest threat to European security and stability since the end of the Cold War," a "wake-up call," and a "stark reminder" that European security "cannot be taken for granted." He urged NATO members to make "tough decisions in view of the long-term strategic impact of Russia's aggression on our own security."

In early June, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel delivered a similar call to European partners to step up their defense spending, saying at a NATO ministerial that the US continues to bear a disproportionate share of the burden of European security, and NATO partners should live up to their commitment to spend two percent of their GDP on their militaries. It was the same message his predecessor, Robert M. Gates, voiced on his last visit to NATO as Defense Secretary. Both warned that the US is getting tired of paying Europe's military bills.

Obama told the graduating Army cadets that NATO, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and similar institutions are "not perfect" but have proved to be a "force multiplier" for the US and have reduced the need for solo US military action. He said the "architecture" of these international organizations "must change," but he didn't say how.

Despite the obvious concerns about Russian adventurism, Obama steadfastly insisted "this isn't the Cold War," and in an interview afterward with National Public Radio, he offered reasons why Russia's actions are understandable, even if the US condemns them.

"Ukraine, in the minds of most Russians, has been a central part of Russia for decades, centuries," Obama told NPR, opining that Putin acted out of fear that "he was being further and further surrounded by NATO." Obama allowed that Crimea has been "historically ... dominated by native Russians and Russian speakers," but he believes the rule of law is "ascendant," and Russia "is going to be on the defense" politically and economically, if not militarily. Obama told NPR he hopes the truncated Ukraine will have "a good relationship with Russia." Asked if he would try to make Russia give Crimea back, his answer was, "We're going to have to see how it plays itself out."

MISSED THAT EXIT

Each time the US military was about undergo a major force drawdown in the last 20 years—under George H. W. Bush at the end of the Cold War, then again under Bill Clinton after the first Gulf War—the Administration in power promised the US

military would retain the means to rapidly rearm and regroup if the world situation demanded it.

Obama has been no exception. In his 2012 National Military Strategy—the one that introduced the so-called "Pacific Pivot" and the "evolution" of US military presence in Europe—Obama made a similar pledge. He wrote that the drawdown would have to allow for "a course change that could be driven by many factors, including shocks or evolutions in the strategic, operational, economic, and technological spheres." A capacity for "reversibility" would be "a key part of our decision calculus" in deciding the "vectors" of "our industrial base, our people, our Active-reserve component balance, our posture, and our partnership emphasis." These calculations underpinned the choices made between "investments that should be made today and those that can be deferred."

Senior Pentagon officials have shortened this idea to the phrase "off-ramps," meaning that the military can change course if the situation warrants. Obama's West Point speech clearly indicated that neither the Russian situation nor China's bolder tests of US leadership in the Pacific drive him to change course. The Cold War, Obama insists, will have to remain in the rearview mirror, even if Putin thinks otherwise.

MAKING A VIRTUE OF NECESSITY

Numerous polls show the American public is exhausted by 13 years of land war. After putting trillions on the national credit card to pay for them, with the disengagement from Iraq, the drawdown in Afghanistan—and the sequester—it's unlikely Obama can order up a major rearmament or even reset to deal with Russian or Chinese adventurism.

So while his oft-repeated inclination is to try to settle problems by talking them out, Obama really has little choice but to make that the default setting on the use of force. Despite the urgency expressed by NATO leaders about the need for the alliance to up its game militarily—especially in those countries that used to be Soviet satellites—the alliance is dragging its heels to react to the Ukraine crisis. Despite Rasmussen's and Hagel's calls to action, few countries in NATO have the political backing for a major rearmament. During the NATO operation in Libya, European allies ran out of weapons. The US stepped in to provide munitions, but three years later, the NATO partners have done little but agree that they ought to restock. Denmark fronted a suggestion that NATO pool munitions buying to save money.

The so-called Pacific Pivot got no mention in Obama's West Point speech. Though it was to have been a break from the previous 10 years of counterinsurgency, the new-again emphasis will be on counterterrorism, he said. The "centralized al Qaeda leadership" has been defeated, he claimed, but splinter groups and franchises are popping up across the Middle East and Africa. To battle these "extremists," Obama announced he'll ask Congress for an up to \$5 billion "Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund" to help build up the military capabilities of friends in the region. The money will be used to buy these countries gear and give them training so that the US can "more effectively partner" with them to prevent terrorists from gaining a "foothold" within their borders.

In the same vein, he said he will continue to authorize selective attacks by remotely piloted aircraft when such attacks are urgently needed to prevent terrorist actions and when loss of innocent life can be minimized.

Obama said the US remains "the indispensable nation," and will lead on the world stage, but that leadership, on his watch, will not come in the form of military action unless the Commander in Chief sees no reasonable alternative. ■