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The futility of military superiority

"Something happened on the superpower's way to superpower. The wars that were to have been won were lost. The enemies to have been weakened were strengthened. The societies to have been saved were destroyed. The global security to have been increased was reduced." How long will the US continue to rely on military superiority when to do so undermines the political justification for its dominance?

Not long ago, newspapers and magazines were filled with articles about the military superiority of the one and only superpower on earth. Having counted aircraft carriers, cruise missiles, long distance bombers, and airborne divisions, everybody seemed to agree that the superiority was beyond reach or dispute. Some drew comparisons with the British Empire, others with Rome, yet others talked of an Empire that defied comparison at all.

The question, then, was not *whether* the US was the mightiest nation on earth, probably the mightiest nation in human history, but *how* it would use its superior power. The leaders of the superpower itself, among them its president, argued that after 9/11 its power should be used to bring about regime changes in evil states and wage a War on Terror. They argued that military superiority (along with "the American mission") gave the US both the right and the duty to unilaterally decide which regimes should be changed, how the War on Terror should be fought, and whether, in doing so, international institutions and conventions should be respected or not.

Robert Kagan, an influential opinion maker at the time, defended the emergent US high-handedness (unilateralism) by arguing that Americans are from Mars while Europeans are from Venus. By this he meant that the Americans, unlike the Europeans, had concluded that the world was still a jungle and the ability to win wars still integral to the ability to achieve peace.

The US National Security Strategy of July 2002 subsequently made it an express aim of US policy to maintain military superiority over all possible competitors. Military superiority would bring more security not only for the US but also for the world as a whole. It would allow for more expeditious changes of rogue regimes into US-friendly democracies and a speedier victory in the War on Terror. In the best-case scenario, evil regimes and the terrorist networks they sponsor would fall apart merely from the "shock and awe" instilled in them by American military superiority. For a brief moment, it was said that "shock and awe" had won the war in Iraq — that brief moment in which it looked like the war had been won.

But something happened on the superpower's way to superpower. The wars that were to have been won were lost. The enemies to have been weakened were strengthened. The societies to have been saved were destroyed. The

global security to have been increased was reduced. Time and again, it seemed impossible to transform US military superiority into global prestige and power, let alone force an adversary "to do our will" — according to Karl von Clausewitz the ultimate aim of military superiority.

So what happened?

One thing was that the nature of the adversary had changed. The adversary that military superiority was to overcome was no longer a threat, while the adversary that was a threat could not be overcome. There were even adversaries that had been nourished by US military superiority, that had flourished in its wake, that had developed weapons and strategies which military superiority provided little defence against.

Military superiority can be used for many things, but arguably not for defeating religiously or ideologically fundamentalist movements for whom chaos is a hotbed, fear a source of energy, humiliation a source of legitimacy, provocation a calculated strategy, and terror a favoured weapon. At any rate, not if military superiority is legitimized as a means to spread and defend freedom and democracy (which is still how US military superiority is legitimized), meaning it cannot reasonably be used for the destruction of civilian populations not prepared "to do our will". What the militarily superior Rome could allow itself to do, what Tacitus described as *solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant* ("making a desert and calling it peace"), the militarily superior US cannot do without destroying the political foundations of its dominance.

The fact that Afghanistan and Iraq are nevertheless on their way to being turned into deserts (of the kind we call *failed states*) goes to show that military superiority as a means might work against freedom and democracy as a goal. And even perhaps against the more straightforward goal of increasing the global power and influence of the US. The Iraq of daily violence, civilian disorder, sectarianism, and military defeat is arguably becoming a more serious threat to US security than the Iraq of Saddam Hussein ever was. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has returned. In Iran, the regime is exploiting the limits of US superpower. All over the Islamic world, radical Jihadism is on the rise.

The strategy of military superiority has possibly had an even more self-defeating effect in Israel–Palestine, where the regional military superpower Israel (supplementing US strategy) is once again allowing itself to make a desert that it will call peace — or at least security. And where, besides yet another political and humanitarian disaster, the outcome will be less peace, less security, and more adversaries of a kind resistant to military superiority.

You don't have to be from Venus to argue that the warriors from Mars have seriously miscalculated what it takes to achieve peace and security on Earth.

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