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Monopolizing War?

By Tom Engelhardt

September 13, 2012

It's pop-quiz time when it comes to the American way of war: three questions, torn from the latest news, just for you. Here's the first of them, and good luck!

Two weeks ago, 200 U.S. Marines began armed operations in...?:

- a) Afghanistan
- b) Pakistan
- c) Iran
- d) Somalia
- e) Yemen
- f) Central Africa
- g) Northern Mali
- h) The Philippines
- i) Guatemala

If you opted for any answer, "a" through "h," you took a reasonable shot at it. After all, there's an [ongoing American war](#) in Afghanistan and somewhere in the southern part of that country, 200 armed U.S. Marines could well have been involved in an operation. In Pakistan, an undeclared, CIA-run air war has long been underway, and in the past there have been [armed border crossings](#) by U.S. special operations forces as well as U.S. piloted [cross-border airstrikes](#), but no Marines.

When it comes to Iran, Washington's regional preparations for war are staggering. The continual buildup of U.S. [naval power](#) in the Persian Gulf, of land forces on [bases](#) around that country, of [air power](#) (and [anti-missile defenses](#)) in the region should leave any observer breathless. There are U.S. special operations forces [near](#) the Iranian border and CIA [drones](#) regularly over that country. In conjunction with the Israelis, Washington has launched a [cyberwar](#) against Iran's nuclear program and computer systems. It has also established fierce oil and banking [sanctions](#), and there seem to have been at least some U.S. [cross-border operations](#) into Iran going back to at least 2007. In addition, a recent front-page *New York Times* story on Obama administration attempts to mollify Israel over its Iran policy included this [ominous line](#): "The administration is also considering ... covert activities that have been previously considered and rejected." So 200 armed Marines in action in Iran — not yet, but don't get down on yourself, it was a good guess.

In Somalia, [according to](#) *Wired* magazine's Danger Room blog, there have been far more U.S. drone flights and strikes against the Islamic extremist al-Shabab movement and al-Qaeda elements than anyone previously knew. In addition, the U.S. has at least partially funded, supported, equipped, advised, and promoted proxy wars there, involving [Ethiopian troops](#) back in 2007 and more recently [Ugandan and Burundian troops](#) (as well as an invading Kenyan army). In addition, CIA operatives and possibly other irregulars and hired guns are [well established](#) in Mogadishu, the capital.

In Yemen, as in Somalia, the combination has been proxy war and strikes by drones (as well as piloted planes), with some U.S. special forces advisers [on the ground](#), and [civilian casualties](#) (and anger at the U.S.) rising in the southern part of the country — but also, as in Somalia, no Marines. Central Africa? Now, there's a thought. After all, at least 100 Green Berets were [sent in](#) there this year as part of a campaign against Joseph Kony's Ugandan-based Lord's Resistance Army. As for Northern Mali, taken over by Islamic extremists (including an al-Qaeda-affiliated group), it certainly presents a target for future U.S. intervention — and we still don't know what those [three U.S. Army commandos](#) who skidded off a bridge to their deaths in their Toyota Land Rover with three "Moroccan prostitutes" were doing in a country with which the U.S. military had officially cut its ties after a democratically elected government was overthrown. But 200 Marines operating in war-torn areas of Africa? Not yet. When it comes to the Philippines, again no Marines, even though [U.S. special forces](#) and [drones](#) have been aiding the government in a low-level conflict with Islamic militants in Mindanao.

As it happens, the correct, if surprising, answer is "i." And if you chose it, congratulations!

On Aug. 29, the Associated Press [reported](#) that a "team of 200 U.S. Marines began patrolling Guatemala's western coast this week in an unprecedented operation to beat drug traffickers in the Central America region, a U.S. military spokesman said Wednesday." This could have been big news. It's a sizable enough intervention: 200 Marines sent into action in a country where we last had a military presence in 1978. If this wasn't the beginning of something bigger and wider, it would be surprising, given that commando-style operatives from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration have been firing weapons and [killing locals](#) in a similar effort in Honduras, and that, along with [U.S. drones](#), the [CIA](#) is evidently moving [ever deeper](#) into the drug war in Mexico.

In addition, there's a history here. After all, in the early part of the previous century, [sending in the Marines](#) — in Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere — was the way Washington demonstrated its power in its own “backyard.” And yet other than a few straightforward news reports on the Guatemalan intervention, there has been no significant media discussion, no storm of criticism or commentary, no mention at either political convention, and no debate or discussion about the wisdom of such a step in this country. Odds are that you didn't even notice that it had happened.

Think of it another way: in the post-2001 era, along with two disastrous wars on the Eurasian mainland, we've been regularly sending in the Marines or special operations forces, as well as naval, air, and robotic power. Such acts are, by now, so ordinary that they are seldom considered worthy of much discussion here, even though no other country acts (or even has the capacity to act) this way. This is simply what Washington's National Security Complex does for a living.

At the moment, it seems, a historical circle is being closed with the Marines once again heading back into Latin America as the “drug war” Washington proclaimed years ago becomes an actual drug war. It's a demonstration that, these days, when Washington sees a problem anywhere on the planet, its version of a “foreign policy” is most likely to call on the U.S. military. Force is increasingly not our option of last resort, but our first choice.

Now, consider question two in our little snap quiz of recent war news:

In 2011, what percentage of the global arms market did the U.S. control?

(Keep in mind that, as everyone knows, the world is an arms bazaar filled with haggling merchants. Though the Cold War and the superpower arms rivalry is long over, there are obviously plenty of countries eager to peddle their weaponry, no matter what conflicts may be stoked as a result.)

- a) 37% (\$12.1 billion), followed closely by Russia (\$10.7 billion), France, China, and the United Kingdom.**
- b) 52.7% (\$21.3 billion), followed by Russia at 19.3% (\$12.8 billion), France, Britain, China, Germany, and Italy.**
- c) 68% (\$37.8 billion), followed by Italy at 9% (\$3.7 billion) and Russia at 8% (\$3.5 billion).**
- d) 78% (\$66.3 billion), followed by Russia at 5.6% (\$4.8 billion).**

Naturally, you naturally eliminated “d” first. Who wouldn't? After all, cornering close to 80% of the arms market would mean that the global weapons bazaar had essentially been converted into a monopoly operation. Of course, it's common knowledge that the U.S. [arms giants](#), given a massive [helping hand](#) in their marketing by the Pentagon, remain the collective 800-pound gorilla in any room. But 37% of that market is nothing to sniff at. (At least, it wasn't in 1990, the final days of the Cold War when the Russians were still a major competitor worldwide.) As for 52.7%, what national industry wouldn't bask in the glory of such a figure — a majority share of arms sold worldwide? (And, in fact, that was an impressive percentage back in the dismal sales year of 2010, when arms budgets worldwide were still feeling the pain of the lingering global economic recession.) Okay, so what about that hefty 68%? It couldn't have been a more striking

achievement for U.S. arms makers back in 2008 in what was otherwise distinctly a lagging market.

The correct answer for 2011, however, is the singularly unbelievable one: the U.S. actually tripled its arms sales last year, hitting a record high, and cornering almost 78% of the global arms trade. This was [reported](#) in late [August](#) but, like those 200 Marines in Guatemala, never made onto front pages or into the top TV news stories. And yet, if arms were drugs (and it's possible that, in some sense, they are, and that we humans can indeed get addicted to them), then the U.S. has become something close enough to the world's sole dealer. That should be front-page news, shouldn't it?

Okay, so here's the third question in today's quiz:

From a local base in which country did U.S. Global Hawk drones fly long-range surveillance missions between late 2001 and at least 2006?

- a) *The Seychelles Islands*
- b) *Ethiopia*
- c) *An unnamed Middle Eastern country*
- d) *Australia*

Actually, the drone base the U.S. has indeed operated in the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean was [first used](#) only in 2009 and the drone base Washington has developed in Ethiopia by upgrading a civilian airport [only became operational](#) in 2011. As for that "[unnamed Middle Eastern country](#)," perhaps [Saudi Arabia](#), the new airstrip being built there, presumably for the CIA's drones, may now be operational. Once again, the right answer turns out to be the unlikely one. Recently, the Australian media reported that the U.S. had flown early, secretive Global Hawk missions out of a Royal Australian Base at Edinburgh. These [were detected](#) by a "group of Adelaide aviation historians." The Global Hawk, an enormous drone, can stay in the air a long time. What those flights were surveilling back then is unknown, though North Korea might be one guess. Whether they continued beyond 2006 is also unknown.

Unlike the previous two stories, this one never made it into the U.S. media and if it had, would have gone unnoticed anyway. After all, who in Washington or among U.S. reporters and pundits would have found it odd that, long before its recent, much-ballyhooed "[pivot](#)" to Asia, the U.S. was flying some of its earliest drone missions over vast areas of the Pacific? Who even finds it strange that, in the years since 2001, the U.S. has been putting together an ever more elaborate network of its [own drone bases](#) on foreign soil, or that the U.S. has an estimated [1,000-1,200](#) military bases scattered across the planet, some the size of small American towns (not to speak of [scads of bases](#) in the United States)?

Like those Marines in Guatemala, like the near-monopoly on the arms trade, this sort of thing is hardly considered significant news in the U.S., though in its size and scope it is surely historically unprecedented. Nor does it seem strange to us that no other country on the planet has more than a tiny number of bases outside its own territory: the Russians have a scattered few in the former SSRs of the Soviet Union and a [single old naval base](#) in Syria that has been [in the](#)

news of late; the French still have some in [Francophone Africa](#); the British have a few leftovers from their own imperial era, including the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, which has essentially been transformed into an American base; and the Chinese may be in the process of [setting up](#) a couple of modest bases as well. Add up every non-American base on foreign soil, however, and the total is probably less than 2% of the American empire of bases.

Investing in War

It would, by the way, be a snap to construct a little quiz like this every couple of weeks from U.S. military news that's reported but not attended to here, and each quiz would make the same essential point: from Washington's perspective, the world is primarily a landscape for arming for, garrisoning for, training for, planning for, and making war. War is what we invest our time, energy, and treasure in on a scale that is, in its own way, remarkable, even if it seldom registers in this country.

In a sense (leaving aside the obvious [inability](#) of the U.S. military to actually win wars), it may, at this point, be what we do best. After all, whatever the results, it's an accomplishment to send 200 Marines to Guatemala for a month of drug interdiction work, to get those Global Hawks secretly to Australia to monitor the Pacific, and to corner the market on things that go boom in the night.

Think of it this way: the United States is alone on the planet, not just in its ability, but in its willingness to use military force in drug wars, religious wars, political wars, conflicts of almost any sort, constantly and on a global scale. No other group of powers collectively even comes close. It also stands alone as a purveyor of major weapons systems and so as a generator of war. It is, in a sense, a massive machine for the promotion of war on a global scale.

We have, in other words, what increasingly looks like a monopoly on war. There have, of course, been warrior societies in the past that committed themselves to a mobilized life of war-making above all else. What's unique about the United States is that it isn't a warrior society. Quite the opposite.

Washington may be mobilized for permanent war. Special operations forces may be operating in up to [120 countries](#). Drone bases may be proliferating across the planet. We may be building up forces in the Persian Gulf and "pivoting" to Asia. [Warrior corporations](#) and rent-a-gun mercenary outfits have mobilized on the country's disparate battlefronts to profit from the increasingly privatized 21st-century American version of war. The American people, however, are demobilized and [detached](#) from the wars, interventions, operations, and other military activities done in their name. As a result, 200 Marines in Guatemala, almost 78% of global weapons sales, drones flying surveillance from Australia — no one here notices; no one here cares.

War: it's what we do the most and attend to the least. It's a nasty combination.