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'A Period of Persistent Conflict'

Why the United States will never have another peacetime president

BY MICAH ZENKO

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In January 2007, with no public debate, congressional hearings, or news coverage, the United States intervened militarily in another country: Somalia.

On December 24, 2006, supported by U.S. tactical intelligence, military training, and "**less than a dozen**" special operations forces on the ground, Ethiopia had invaded Somalia with the goal of unseating the ruling Council of Islamic Courts (CIC). As the Ethiopian ground offensive quickly overwhelmed CIC defenses surrounding the capital of Mogadishu, Somali militants and al-Qaeda affiliates fled south. Some were tracked by U.S. Predator drones and cell phone intercepts.

Two weeks later, a U.S. Air Force Special Operations **AC-130 gunship** flying out of eastern Ethiopia fired at a convoy of suspected militants near the village of Ras Kamboni in southern Somalia. The targets were senior al Qaeda operatives allegedly involved in the East African U.S. embassy bombings in August 1998. However, Ethiopian troops and U.S. special operations forces that arrived after the attack **confirmed** that the targets were not in the convoy, although ten other suspected Somali militants were killed. As an American official later **acknowledged**, "Frankly, I don't think we know who we killed."

After news broke of the U.S. military involvement in Somalia, Sen. Robert Byrd had the following **exchange** with Gen. Peter Pace, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during a Armed Services Committee hearing:

BYRD: Under what authority were the airstrikes in Somalia executed?

PACE: Under the authority of the president of the United States, sir.

BYRD: What authority did he have? What did he base his authority on?

PACE: There was an order that was published a couple of years ago that received the proper authorities from the secretary of defense and the president to be able to track al Qaeda and other terrorist networks worldwide, sir.

BYRD: Do you think that authority was sufficient?

PACE: I do, sir, from both -- I do, sir.

This incident of congressional oversight over a president's war-making powers is revealing in its brevity and rarity. Since September 11, 2001, the president has been able to threaten or use military force to achieve a range of foreign policy objectives with few checks and balances or sustained media coverage -- to an extent unprecedented in U.S. history. Anything short of deploying large numbers of U.S. ground troops is tolerated, and any executive branch justification for using lethal force is broadly accepted, including the notion that such military operations can continue in perpetuity.

Though both of the presidential candidates claim to want a peaceful world (Mitt Romney used some version of "peace" 12 times in the final presidential **debate**), it is unlikely that the United States will ever have a peacetime president again.

The primary reason for this stems from how policymakers in Washington **perceive the world** -- a perception that bridges partisan divisions. According to most officials, the international security environment is best characterized by limitless, complex, and imminent threats facing the United States. Those threats require the military to be perpetually on a wartime footing and the president to frequently authorize the use of lethal force. As a Pentagon strategy **document** first noted in 2010, the United States has entered "a period of persistent conflict."

In an excellent **op-ed** on Sunday, Greg Jaffe pointed out that threat inflation is a chronic habit shared by news media, think tanks, and policymakers, who have made the following observations in the past year:

- General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, **claimed**: "In my personal military judgment, formed over thirty-eight years, we are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime, right now." Considering the vastly more threatening times that the United States faced since Dempsey was born in 1952, his diagnosis of the world is either flawed or suffers from **hindsight bias**, defined as "the inclination to see events that have already occurred as being more predictable than they were before they took place."
- Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has constantly repeated his **threat smorgasbord** of specific and generalized threats that emanate from innumerable states and nonstate actors (i.e., everyone). Although he **admitted**, "I don't consider myself to be schooled in the art of knowing what the hell cyber systems [do] and how it all works," three weeks ago Panetta **warned** (again) of an impending "cyber Pearl Harbor," which

computer experts have predicted since at least 1991. This is a remarkable claim given that no American has ever died from a cyberattack, while the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor killed 2,345 American troops and another 57 U.S. civilians.

- Senator Lindsey Graham referred to Iran as "an existential threat" on the floor of the Senate. Again, if he actually believes that the existence of the United States is threatened by a country with a defense budget that amounts to less than 3 percent of the Pentagon's and no nuclear weapons or deployable military capabilities, then endorsing unilateral preventive attacks would be justified. And, indeed, if diplomacy fails, Graham has called for unilateral and preventive attacks, both against the suspected nuclear weapons sites and to "neuter the regime's ability to wage war against us and our allies."

In response to this world of grave uncertainty and looming threats, the United States has invested heavily in offensive military capabilities that the president leverages with speed, secrecy, and minimal oversight.

Drones: On September 11, 2001, the U.S. military had fewer than 200 drones (less than a handful were armed). Today, there are approximately **7,500**, a few hundred of which are equipped to fire several types of missiles. The workhorses of the U.S. drone strike campaigns are the Predator and Reaper systems. In 2007, there were **18** Predator and Reaper Combat Air Patrols (CAPs), in which a few drones maintain one continuous orbit over a specific territory. Today, there are **60 CAPs**, with plans for **65** by May 2014. As I **noted** last week, America's use of drones to conduct targeted killings in non-battlefield settings has now entered its eleventh year, with plans to continue them for at least another decade.

Special Operations Forces (SOF): Since September 11, Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has more than doubled in size and budget from some 30,000 troops and \$2.2 billion in 2001 to 67,000 and \$10.5 billion today. Overseas deployments have quadrupled and have involved more than 100 countries. Presently, **85 percent** of the estimated 11,500 SOF troops deployed overseas are stationed in the Middle East with the bulk in Afghanistan, where they are **projected** to have an enlarged role up to and beyond the stated withdrawal deadline of 2014. Senior defense officials **envision** that SOF will constitute between one-third and one-half of all U.S. forces in Afghanistan after 2014, pending an agreement with Kabul. **Adm. William McRaven**, commander of SOCOM, **noted** that this could include "3,000 folks deployed outside of Afghanistan."

The temptation for presidents to employ Navy SEALs and Army Delta Teams indefinitely is real, given that the media and policymakers portray SOF as possessing superhuman and infallible skills. However, as my colleague Max Boot noted in an exceptional **overview** of what SOF are actually intended to achieve, their uses in kinetic raids are rarely connected to any larger strategy: "From Pakistan to Yemen, there is a tendency to use JSOC, often in cooperation with the CIA, to play 'whack-a-mole' against terrorist organizations." Gen. Pace **echoed** this concern in May: "I worry about speed making it too easy to employ force. I worry about speed making it too easy to take the easy answer -- let's go whack them with special operations -- as opposed to perhaps a more laborious answer for perhaps a better long-term solution."

Cyberattacks: Since 2006, according to the **National Military Strategy for Cyberspace Operations**, it has been U.S. policy that the "[Pentagon] will conduct kinetic missions to preserve freedom of action and strategic advantage in cyberspace" that "can be either offensive or defensive and used in conjunction with other mission areas." There is little clarity over many aspects of U.S. offensive cyber capabilities, including what they are, who authorizes them, and what are the rules of engagement (assuming one can attribute the source of an initial attack and identify a proportional target). A senior U.S. official recently **declared**: "Those are always classified things. It's not helpful to the United States to give a road map to the enemy to know when something is an attack on the nation and when it is not." Of course, "things" cannot have any deterrent effect on potential adversaries if they are secret, nor are they always classified -- see the Obama administration's **Nuclear Posture Review** for U.S. nuclear doctrine.

Both Presidents Bush and Obama have reportedly authorized offensive cyberattacks against Iran that had "kinetic-like" effects. In *The Inheritance*, David Sanger first offered clues about activities covered in a spring 2008 presidential finding that authorized covert action including "efforts to interfere with the power supply to nuclear facilities -- something that can sometimes be accomplished by tampering with computer code, and getting power sources to blow up." This past June, Sanger further **revealed** that Obama significantly accelerated offensive cyberattacks -- codenamed Olympic Games -- against computers that run Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities.

(In a startling anecdote about the lack of congressional oversight over such covert cyber operations, Representative Dan Lungren wondered aloud at a House Judiciary Committee **hearing** in July: "Would it bother you to know that the detail that was described in the *New York Times*, if true, is a level of detail not presented to members of Congress, such as the chairman of the Cybersecurity Subcommittee on Homeland Security, that is, happens to be me.")

Supporting the increased use of drones, special operations, cyberattacks, and other covert military programs has been the tremendous growth in the size and cost of the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC). In **1998**, the intelligence budget was \$26.7 billion (based on an accidental leak from that year). In 2012, the IC will spend \$75.4 billion for all of its **national** and **military** intelligence programs, the scope of which is astonishing. As Dana Priest and William Arkin **reported** in 2010: "1,271 government organizations and 1,931 private companies work on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security and intelligence in about 10,000 locations across the United States." This sprawling U.S. intelligence apparatus is **estimated** to require 210,000 governmental employees and 30,000 private contractors.

Congressional oversight of presidential war-making powers has further dwindled. There are a few libertarian leaning congressional members who raise the **War Powers Resolution** during hearings with administration officials, although only when the serving president is of the other political party. Sen. Byrd attempted to rally fellow legislators by waving his pocket Constitution and reminding them, "Congress is not a rubberstamp or a presidential lapdog -- obedient and unquestioning. Oversight, oversight, oversight is among our most important responsibilities." Sen. James Webb, who is stepping down in January, cosponsored a **bill** in May that would require the White House to formally request congressional approval before using the military in humanitarian operations (it would require a vote within 48 hours). Webb **noted**: "Year by year, skirmish by skirmish, the role of the Congress in determining where the U.S. military would

operate, and when the awesome power of our weapon systems would be unleashed, has diminished." Predictably, the bill went nowhere.