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U.S. foreign policy remains overmilitarized

By Dan Simpson
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I will employ this column to consider the state of U.S. foreign policy under President Barack Obama before I take off on a two-week trip to India to try to better understand that richly complicated country.

Another reason to look at foreign policy closely now is that recent presidential debates are revealing a disposition on the part of some candidates to take a hare-brained dive into some of the issues involved.

The primary mistaken tilt in U.S. foreign policy at present is overmilitarization. So far this year America has deployed special-operations forces to a breathtaking 135 nations. One problem is that we don't know how to end wars and bring all of our troops home. We still have thousands in Germany, Japan, South Korea, Djibouti, Iraq and Afghanistan, mostly remnants of long-ago conflicts.

If the thought of ending such deployments ever crosses the mind of Mr. Obama, his impulse is instantly squashed by a combination of military officers and their civilian counterparts whose careers depend on military entanglements, defense manufacturers and contractors based in

congressional districts all over the country and analysts who feed on keeping Americans frightened.

Explain to me just how 4,000 U.S. troops, planes and drones in Djibouti help keep Americans safe.

Let's look at some successes.

The Iran deal, arrived at after years of negotiations involving the United States, China, France, Russia, Britain and Germany, is clearly one of them. It was tested by fire at home by alleged American friend Benjamin Netanyahu, prime minister of alleged ally Israel, as well as by members of Congress, skeptical of what can be achieved by active U.S. diplomacy led by Secretary of State John F. Kerry.

That agreement is now being implemented. The International Atomic Energy Agency has reported that Iran is honoring its commitment to provide information about its previous nuclear activities, including military activities. Seeing Iran play by some international rules is a step toward bringing the country back into the international community after it has been sitting out in the cold since the ayatollahs' 1979 revolution. Iran has a population of 80 million, borders with seven countries and a sizable economy that's attractive to American investors and traders.

Another success for U.S. foreign policy is the beginning of the end of the foolish and embarrassing blockage in U.S. relations with tiny, neighboring Cuba that had prevailed since the Castros took power in 1959. It was arguable that U.S.-Cuban relations had to remain poisonous while Cuba was playing footsie with the old Soviet Union. But after 1990 there was no excuse for the United States to continue to boycott Cuba while waiting for Fidel and Raul to die. Someone needs to remind Cuban-American Republican candidates Sens. Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz that the 1950s are long gone in that regard, no matter what their campaign contributors might tell them.

Also on the plus side is that Mr. Obama is better off with Mr. Kerry as secretary of state, as opposed to Hillary Clinton, who, while acting as secretary of state in Mr. Obama's first term, was also running for president and shilling for the Clinton Foundation. A secretary of state has to take political risks, inevitably presenting the possibility of scratched fenders. It's better if the job is the last one that its occupant seeks.

There are still black marks on the escutcheon. The major one is the continuation of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. They cost a lot of money and continue to put the lives of 20,000 American troops at risk. And for what? Serious trouble in either country can be spotted by overhead and

other intelligence sources. The governments in both countries are full of people we have no business supporting. Our involvement in both draws us into activities that are not worthy of us.

The most recent example was the U.S. aerial attack on the hospital of Doctors Without Borders in Kunduz, Afghanistan. We killed at least 24 people, including doctors, other medical staff and patients, including children. It was a mistake, we are told. If we weren't there trying to save the Afghans from their own lack of willingness to save themselves, it wouldn't have happened. Mr. Obama as mourner-in-chief just doesn't play well in the Kunduz drama. America comes off as an obscene killer.

It would be embarrassing if it weren't so humiliating to see Republican candidate Jeb Bush telling us his brother as president kept us safe. Are we supposed to forget about the August 2001 briefing that George W. Bush ignored — the one that said al-Qaida was determined to attack us imminently? George W. was asleep at the switch. Maybe Jeb wouldn't be. But please don't ask us to rewrite history about the George W. Bush administration's fecklessness.

Other mistakes that continue include the seemingly irresistible temptation to pull the tails of China and Russia, as opposed to simply accepting that they are large players and that we need to get along with them. The fact that the Chinese are dredging up part of the South China Sea to claim possession of some tiny islands shouldn't matter at all to the United States. We have Hawaii, Guam and Wake Island for military bases in the Pacific, and they are, by the way, considerably more solid than the islands the Chinese have created. I know where I would prefer to be in a storm.