

COMMENTARY

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The 9/11 Decade

By Robert D. Kaplan

When Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorists destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center and a section of the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the world had already become multipolar in a diplomatic and economic sense. Now, a decade later, despite the dramatic accomplishments of the American military in turning the tide in Iraq and killing bin Laden, we are entering a multipolar world in a military sense as well. Although U.S. soldiers and marines have slogged their way through the mountains of Afghanistan and the alleyways of Iraq, countries of the Indo-Pacific region have been quietly building their maritime, air, cyber and space capacities. This is nothing less than a power shift that has gone unnoticed because the attention of the public has been focused almost exclusively on events in Southwest Asia.

To be sure neither China nor India – or any other country in the greater Indian Ocean or Western Pacific region – is about to challenge U.S. military dominance: America is declining only very gradually, and in relative terms. But a point of inflection has been reached.

The U.S. Navy reduced its fleet of nearly 600 warships in the 1980s to nearly 300 today with a significant number of hulls scheduled to retire in the 2020s. In the meantime China has a shop-til-you-drop attitude toward acquiring submarines and India is building one of the world's largest navies. Similar trends hold for air forces. Even as European defense budgets have fallen and the Pentagon is about to face dramatic cuts, the nations of Southeast Asia have increased their defense budgets by a third over the past decade.

It is ironic that the trend away from American predominance is unfolding as the Army and Marine Corps, despite the enormous manpower strains placed on them by the operational tempo of two wars, have improved qualitatively beyond measure. Because of difficult lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq, not only are U.S.

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ground forces able to deploy anywhere in the world at a moment's notice, but they are able to conduct multiple, sophisticated counterinsurgency campaigns simultaneously. There is a profound truth in the unofficial motto of these soldiers and marines: no better friend, no worse enemy.

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deeply regretted for years, resulted in the deaths of thousands of Americans and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqis at a cost of more than a trillion dollars. Although the Iraq War did not in and of itself cause America's relative decline, it is symbolic and symptomatic of that trend.

Nevertheless, one must be careful about projecting such a trend in linear fashion because anniversaries are analytically problematic. They force one to view them from a particular moment in time: a point that in and of itself is distorting.

For no one can know how Iraq will look in two or three decades. No doubt developments in both neighboring Iran and Syria will help determine the ultimate legacy of the Iraq War.

It is even possible that Iraq will represent for America what the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 represented for Great Britain. One of the many causes of that violent uprising was the influence of evangelical reformers attempting to modernize and Christianize India by forcibly molding it in the West's image and likeness. The result was a revolt against British authority with cities besieged before being eventually relieved by colonial forces. But that debacle did not signal the end of the British Empire, which continued and even expanded for another century. Instead it marked the transition from an ad hoc imperium fired by an evangelical zeal to a calmer and more pragmatic empire built on commerce and technology.

Ten years after 9/11 the United States has roughly speaking two kinds of militaries: one with ground forces oriented toward counterinsurgency operations and the other with naval and air forces maintaining the balance of power in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. The former is the stalking horse of idealists and humanitarians and the latter the default position of realists who

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are leery of armed interventions. With budget cuts sure to affect defense capabilities over the coming years, it will become harder and harder to accomplish both missions. Thus curtailing the effects of China's military rise could mean restraining the appetite for Bosnia- and Libya-style interventions. Ironically, by dampening the American desire for ground interventions, the Iraq War will enhance American national power over the long haul by allowing the United States to concentrate on projecting naval and air power in the maritime Indo-Pacific region. That might turn out to be the ultimate legacy of 9/11.

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and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

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Center for a New American Security
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 403
Washington, DC 20004

TEL 202.457.9400
FAX 202.457.9401
EMAIL info@cnas.org
www.cnas.org