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Opinion

The 'Long War' quagmire

The doctrine, which posits an 80-year or so war against insurgents in the Middle East to South Asia, needs more scrutiny.

By Tom Hayden

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Without public debate and without congressional hearings, a segment of the Pentagon and fellow travelers have embraced a doctrine known as the Long War, which projects an "arc of instability" caused by insurgent groups from Europe to South Asia that will last between 50 and 80 years. According to one of its architects, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are just "small wars in the midst of a big one."

Consider the audacity of such an idea. An 80-year undeclared war would entangle 20 future presidential terms stretching far into the future of voters not yet born. The American death toll in Iraq and Afghanistan now approaches 5,000, with the number of wounded a multiple many times greater. Including the American dead from 9/11, that's 8,000 dead so far in the first decade of the Long War. And if the American armed forces are stretched thin today, try to conceive of seven more decades of combat.

The costs are unimaginable too. According to economists Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes, Iraq alone will be a \$3-trillion war. Those costs, and the other deficit spending of recent years, yield "virtually no room for new domestic initiatives for Mr. Obama or his successors," according to a New York Times budget analysis in February. Continued deficit financing for the Long War will rob today's younger generation of resources for their future.

The term "Long War" was first applied to America's post-9/11 conflicts in 2004 by Gen. John P. Abizaid, then head of U.S. Central Command, and by the retiring chairman of the Joint Chiefs of State, Gen. Richard B. Myers, in 2005.

According to David Kilcullen, a top counterinsurgency advisor to Army Gen. David H. Petraeus and a proponent of the Long War doctrine, the concept was polished in "a series of windowless offices deep inside the Pentagon" by a small team that successfully lobbied to incorporate the term into the [2006 Quadrennial Defense Review](#), the nation's long-term military blueprint.

President George W. Bush declared in his 2006 State of the Union message that "our own generation is in a long war against a determined enemy."

The concept has quietly gained credence. Washington Post reporter-turned-author Thomas E. Ricks used "The Long War" as the title for the epilogue of his 2009 book on Iraq, in which he predicted that the U.S. was only halfway through the combat phase there.

It has crept into legal language. Federal Appeals Court Judge Janice Rogers Brown, a darling of the American right, recently [ruled in favor of holding detainees permanently](#) because otherwise, "each successful campaign of a long war would trigger an obligation to release Taliban fighters captured in earlier clashes."

Among defense analysts, Andrew J. Bacevich, a Vietnam veteran who teaches at Boston University, is the leading critic of the Long War doctrine, criticizing its origins among a "small, self-perpetuating, self-anointed group of specialists" who view public opinion "as something to manipulate" if they take it into consideration at all.

The Long War has momentum, though the term is absent from the [2010 Quadrennial Defense Review](#) unveiled by Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates in February. One commentator has noted the review's apparent preference for finishing "our current wars before thinking about the next."

Still we fight wars that bleed into each other without clear end points. Political divisions in Iraq threaten to derail the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops scheduled for 2012.

As troop levels decline in Iraq, they grow to 100,000 in Afghanistan, where envoy Richard C. Holbrooke famously says we'll know success "when we see it." The Afghan war has driven Al Qaeda into Pakistan, where U.S. intelligence officers covertly collaborate with the Pakistani military. Lately our special forces have stepped up covert operations in Yemen.

It never ends. British security expert Peter Neumann at King's College has said that Europe is a "nerve center" of global jihad because of underground terrorists in havens protected by civil liberties laws. Could that mean NATO will have to occupy Europe?

It's time the Long War strategy was put under a microscope and made the focus of congressional hearings and media scrutiny. The American people deserve a voice in the strategizing that will affect their future and that of their grandchildren. There are at least three important questions to address in public forums:

* What is the role of the Long War idea in United States' policy now? Can the Pentagon or president impose such war-making decisions without debate and congressional ratification?

* Who exactly is the enemy in a Long War? Is Al Qaeda (or "Islamic fundamentalism") considered to be a unitary enemy like the "international communist conspiracy" was supposed

to be? Can a Long War be waged with only a blanket authorization against every decentralized group lodged in countries from Europe to South Asia?

* Above all, what will a Long War cost in terms of American tax dollars, American lives and American respect in the world? Is it sustainable? If not, what are the alternatives?

President Obama has implied his own disagreement with the Long War doctrine without openly repudiating the term. He has pledged to remove all U.S. troops from Iraq by 2012, differing with those like Ricks who predict continuing combat, resulting in a Korean-style occupation. Obama also pledges to "begin" American troop withdrawals from Afghanistan by summer 2011, in contrast to those who demand we remain until an undefined victory. Obama told West Point cadets that "our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended, because the nation that I'm most interested in building is our own."

Those are naive expectations to neoconservatives and to some in the Pentagon for whom the Long War fills a vacuum left by the end of the Cold War. They will try to trap Obama in a Long War by demanding permanent bases in Iraq, slowing American withdrawals from Afghanistan to a trickle and defending secret operations in Pakistan. Where violence flares, he will be blamed for disengaging prematurely. Where situations stabilize, he will be counseled it's because we keep boots on the ground. We will keep spending dollars we don't have on wars without end.

The underlying issues should be debated now, before the future itself has been drafted for war.

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