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Hillary Clinton's Foreign Policy Paradox

By Evan N. Resnick

Synopsis

Paradoxically, although US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton is relying on her extensive foreign policy experience to bolster her electoral appeal, her actual track record as a foreign policy decision maker is worrisome.

Commentary

EARLIER THIS month, President Barack Obama waded into the rough and tumble 2016 US presidential contest by endorsing Hillary Clinton as the Democratic nominee. In his videotaped announcement, Obama declared: "I don't think there has ever been someone so qualified to hold this office."

In a widely acclaimed address in San Diego just a few days prior to Obama's endorsement, Clinton contrasted her own foreign policy credentials with those of her presumptive Republican rival Donald Trump. A former First Lady, US senator, and secretary of state, Clinton professed to have acquired "some experience with the tough calls and the hard work of statecraft," adding that she has "sat in the Situation Room and advised the president on some of the toughest choices he faced". By comparison, Clinton mocked Trump, a political neophyte, for claiming that "he has foreign policy experience because he ran the Miss Universe pageant in Russia".

Hawkish Proclivities, Disastrous Decisions

Paradoxically, although Clinton has amassed considerable experience in foreign policy, her substantive track record as a foreign policy decision-maker is worrisome. Repeatedly since she entered the Senate in 2001, Clinton's hawkish proclivities have placed her on the wrong side of some of the most catastrophic national security decisions of the post-Cold War era.

Most importantly, in October 2002 then-Senator Clinton voted in favour of the congressional resolution that authorised President George W. Bush to invade Iraq. The 2003-11 Iraq War ranks among the greatest calamities in the history of US foreign policy. Not only was the conflict exorbitantly costly in every sense of the term, but it accomplished little.

The war transformed a ramshackle dictatorship that lacked any capacity to endanger the United States into a failing state riven by bloody sectarian conflict. After presiding over the 2011 withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, President Obama subsequently had to re-deploy several thousand troops back into the country to combat Islamic State (IS), a vicious insurgent group that was midwived by the initial American invasion.

In her first year as President Obama's secretary of state, Clinton pressed for a large-scale "surge" of US ground forces into the stalemated war in Afghanistan. During the administration's prolonged Afghanistan policy review, Clinton helped tilt the scales in favour of an expanded US commitment to Afghanistan.

Siding with the secretary of defence and Obama's senior uniformed advisers, Clinton advocated the deployment of 40,000 additional US troops to support an ambitious counterinsurgency mission against the Afghan Taliban. In so doing, Clinton helped marginalise Vice-President Joseph Biden, who both opposed the troop increase and nation-building mandate.

In the end, a reluctant Obama acquiesced to a somewhat leaner and temporally restricted surge. Ultimately, the costly initiative failed to quash the Taliban or consolidate popular support for the corrupt government in Kabul and the longest war in American history continues to grind on with no end in sight.

Getting to '51-49' on Libya

Then, during the Arab Spring of early 2011, Clinton enjoined a wary President Obama to launch an air campaign in support of rebel forces seeking to overthrow Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi. Although the operation was relatively inexpensive, incurred no allied casualties, and resulted in Gaddafi's ouster, it was otherwise a debacle.

Analysts have raised doubts about the operation's casus belli of Gaddafi's alleged intention to massacre civilians in the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, the intervention arguably produced more civilian casualties than would have otherwise been the case by prolonging the civil war, and postwar Libya has since descended into anarchy and has become a haven for IS and Al Qaeda.

Clinton is especially culpable for the Libya fiasco. According to the president, the decision to intervene was "51-49," with both Obama and Secretary of Defence Robert Gates expressing strong reservations about launching yet another US-led war in the Middle East.

Fortunately for Clinton, her foreign policy record has not yet been a major liability on

the campaign trail. Congressional Republicans subpoenaed Clinton last October to testify at length about Libya, but fixated on Clinton's tangential role in the murder of the US ambassador and three other Americans by Islamist militants in Benghazi in September 2012. Meanwhile, Clinton's now defeated rival for the Democratic nomination, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, rarely discussed foreign policy, and her Republican challenger, Trump, has focused much of his fire on the ongoing FBI investigation of Clinton's use of a private email server while secretary of state.

Potential Quagmires Abound

In a recent investigative report by the *New York Times* on Clinton's role in the Libya intervention, one of Clinton's former State Department colleagues characterised her foreign policy philosophy as follows: "When the choice is between action and inaction, and you've got risks in either direction, which you often do, she'd rather be caught trying." Unfortunately for Clinton, "action" has all too frequently meant the profligate use of military power and "being caught trying", a euphemism for the expenditure of precious blood and treasure on behalf of unnecessary wars that have compromised American national security.

If Clinton is elected president in November, she will not have Barack Obama around to constrain her most reckless impulses. For a new commander-in-chief with an itchy trigger finger and much to prove, the opportunities for future quagmires abound. This is especially the case in the broader Middle East, where US troops remain ensconced in Afghanistan and Iraq, anarchy continues to reign in Libya, and where Clinton has already called for the imposition of a no-fly zone in war-torn Syria.

Even more frighteningly, revanchist behaviour on the part of Russia in Eastern Europe and China in maritime Southeast Asia is also raising the spectre of great power conflagration just as the world marks the centennial of the First World War. Successfully navigating the ship of state past these various dangers will require Clinton to adopt a more nuanced conception of action and heightened appreciation of the virtues of occasional inaction than she has demonstrated in her political career to date.

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