

Obama and the Military: Purely Tactical Disagreements

The Role of the US Military-Industrial Complex

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In his last presidential address, US President D. Eisenhower warned his countrymen against the unchecked growth of influence of the political, ideological, economic, financial, and industrial militarily oriented machine which had emerged in the US by that time. To describe it, he coined the term military-industrial complex which later became commonly adopted. Since then the US military-industrial complex has gained a much greater clout. Quite possibly President Obama is not yet fully aware of the great extent to which the military-industrial complex is able to exert influence on him and his policies, but no doubt he is already being influenced by it. This fact must be taken into account to understand Obama's politics in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US military-industrial complex – the world's largest – is not limited to the US armed forces and companies manufacturing weaponry. It also includes the federal and private organizations oriented towards the war, including a number of legislative and executive bodies. It is also fair to say that the US intelligence community belongs to the country's military-industrial complex. The US military-industrial complex has enormous financial resources at its disposal and is extremely influential, largely due to its symbiotic relationship with transnational corporations which routinely employ the US military might and the potential of its intelligence agencies to promote their interests worldwide.

The whole enormous monster functions according to its own laws and it takes a tremendous effort to make it adjust its plans. Can President Obama make such an effort?

During Obama's presidential campaign his dovish ideas concerning the settlement of conflicts in various parts of the world – mainly in Iraq and Afghanistan – were warmly welcomed by the public and seemed to draw no comments from the military. In the White House, President Obama confirmed that his plan would be to withdraw most of the US forces from Iraq within 16 months. The army generals immediately responded by suggesting a withdrawal within 23 months citing a number of unresolved strategic problems. Eventually a compromise – 19 months – was reached, but options to prolong indefinitely the presence of the US group of forces which is due to stay in Iraq after the general withdrawal in 2010 were invoked at the same time.

Evidently Obama expected to meet with opposition from the military in dealing with Afghanistan as well. To ensure clarity from the start he called his plan the "withdrawal strategy", but judging by the information and comments in the US media, what we are going to witness is not exactly a withdrawal. The military hold that the situation with the Talibs would turn hopeless unless the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan are built up. The US

Administration agreed and decided to increase the current 38,000 US and 25,000 NATO contingents in Afghanistan by 17,000 and 4,000 servicemen respectively. Unlike the case of Iraq, no specific withdrawal timetable for Afghanistan is even being discussed. Gen. David D. McKiernan who served recently as the US forces commander in Afghanistan said that a strengthened US contingent should stay in the country for at least another five years¹. This would altogether mean a 12-year US military presence in Afghanistan. Other military commanders mentioned even longer terms. It appears that the notorious Bin Laden with his permanent threats is needed by Washington to justify the US military presence in Afghanistan.

And still, why is it that the US army – despite its servicemen getting killed in Iraq and Afghanistan – is reluctant to withdraw from the countries? Is the new US Administration interested in resolving the problems in them or is it simply trying to maintain status quo that makes it possible for the US to pursue its own agenda in the Middle East and South Asia? The first of the above must be true judging by the statements made by Obama, but **if put under scrutiny his strategy looks more like a disguise for the same old politics implemented by former US President G. Bush.**

Various interests make the US stay in the two regions. First, the Pentagon has to account for the enormous amounts of taxpayers' money it is absorbing. Secondly, there are also business interests involved. It is no secret that security is one of the most serious problems confronting oil companies in Iraq, and the US army – jointly with private security contractors – certainly can help. **Over more than five years of the US occupation of Iraq quite a few US army servicemen, including those from the top command, started their own business in Iraq.** Commercial interests make them want the US presence in Iraq to continue at any cost.

Obama is coming under pressure from the military-industrial complex not only because of his politics in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even the moderate plans to downsize certain defense programs are drawing strong criticism, especially from the ranks of Republican politicians. James Mountain "Jim" Inhofe from Oklahoma said: "President Obama is disarming America. Our sons and daughters are risking their lives fighting an enemy whose sole purpose is the destruction of our country and our way of life, while their president disarms America"². Speaking recently at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, John Cornyn, a Republican Senator from Texas, accused Obama's Administration of attempting "to cash in a peace dividend" and weakening the US defense. He said that "great powers, namely China and Russia, are pursuing independent military modernization programs to improve their military capabilities with the intention of rivaling the United States" while Obama's Administration is cutting the defense budget in the name of domestic priorities.

As for cutting the defense budget, that is clearly an overstatement. **According to a report published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the US military spending grew by 9.7% in 2008 and reached the astronomic figure of \$607 bn (42% of the world's total).** Compare: China, the country with the world's second largest military budget, spends about \$120 bn on its defense.

Sen. Cornyn was discontent that in 2008 Pentagon got \$50 bn less than it was promised. Besides, there is a plan not to buy the costly F-22 jet fighters and to stop manufacturing the C-17 strategic airlifters. However, lobbyists ignore the fact that the inefficient programs are being cut on Pentagon own suggestion. At the same time, a boost awaits more modern

programs such as the production of the F-35 fighter and the missile defense systems capable of intercepting ballistic missiles at the initial phase of flight.

There are no reasons to regard Obama as a dove and a proponent of massive disarmament, though conflicts between him and the military-industrial complex are possible. The disagreements are purely tactical: **there is a growing understanding in the ranks of the US establishment that the US is gradually losing its grip on global processes. What can it do to reverse the trend? There may be tactical disagreements, but there is unanimity among the US political class that this can be done only on the basis of building up the US military might and raising the potential of the US army to a new and higher level.**

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