

# The New Obama Doctrine, A Six-Point Plan for Global War

Special Ops, Drones, Spy Games, Civilian Soldiers, Proxy Fighters, and Cyber Warfare

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It looked like a scene out of a Hollywood movie. In the inky darkness, men in full combat gear, armed with automatic weapons and wearing night-vision goggles, grabbed hold of a thick, woven cable hanging from a MH-47 Chinook helicopter. Then, in a flash, each “fast-roped” down onto a ship below. Afterward, “Mike,” a Navy SEAL who would not give his last name, bragged to an Army public affairs sergeant that, when they were on their game, the SEALs could put 15 men on a ship this way in 30 seconds or less.

Once on the aft deck, the special ops troops broke into squads and methodically searched the ship as it bobbed in Jinhae Harbor, South Korea. Below deck and on the bridge, the commandos located several men and trained their weapons on them, but nobody fired a shot. It was, after all, a training exercise.

All of those ship-searchers were SEALs, but not all of them were American. Some were from Naval Special Warfare Group 1 out of Coronado, California; others hailed from South Korea’s Naval Special Brigade. The drill was part of Foal Eagle 2012, a multinational, joint-service exercise. It was also a model for — and one small part of — a much publicized U.S. military “pivot” from the Greater Middle East to Asia, a move that includes sending an initial contingent of 250 Marines to Darwin, Australia, basing littoral combat ships in Singapore, strengthening military ties with [Vietnam](#) and [India](#), staging war games in the Philippines (as well as a drone strike there), and shifting the majority of the Navy’s ships to the Pacific by the end of the decade.

That modest training exercise also reflected another kind of pivot. The face of American-style war-fighting is once again changing. Forget full-scale invasions and large-footprint occupations on the Eurasian mainland; instead, think: special operations forces working on their own but also training or fighting beside allied militaries (if not outright proxy armies) in hot spots around the world. And along with those special ops advisors, trainers, and commandos expect ever more funds and efforts to flow into the militarization of spying and intelligence, the use of drone aircraft, the launching of cyber-attacks, and joint Pentagon operations with increasingly militarized “civilian” government agencies.

Much of this has been noted in the media, but how it all fits together into what could be called the new global face of empire has escaped attention. And yet this represents nothing short of a new Obama doctrine, a six-point program for twenty-first-century war, American-style, that the administration is now carefully developing and honing. Its global scope is

already breathtaking, if little recognized, and like Donald Rumsfeld's military lite and David Petraeus's counterinsurgency operations, it is evidently going to have its day in the sun — and like them, it will undoubtedly disappoint in ways that will surprise its creators.

## The Blur-ness

For many years, the U.S. military has been talking up and promoting the concept of “[jointness](#).” An Army helicopter landing Navy SEALs on a Korean ship catches some of this ethos at the tactical level. But the future, it seems, has something else in store. Think of it as “blur-ness,” a kind of organizational version of war-fighting in which a dominant Pentagon fuses its forces with other government agencies — especially the CIA, the State Department, and the Drug Enforcement Administration — in complex, overlapping missions around the globe.

In 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld began his “revolution in military affairs,” steering the Pentagon toward a [military-lite](#) model of high-tech, [agile](#) forces. The concept came to a [grim end](#) in Iraq's embattled cities. A decade later, the last vestiges of its many failures continue to play out in a stalemated war in Afghanistan against a rag-tag minority insurgency that can't be beaten. In the years since, two secretaries of defense and a new president have presided over another transformation — this one geared toward avoiding ruinous, large-scale land wars which the U.S. has consistently proven unable to win.

Under President Obama, the U.S. has expanded or launched numerous military campaigns — most of them utilizing a mix of the six elements of twenty-first-century American war. Take the American war in Pakistan — a poster-child for what might now be called the Obama formula, if not doctrine. Beginning as a [highly-circumscribed](#) drone assassination campaign backed by limited [cross-border](#) commando raids under the Bush administration, U.S. operations in Pakistan have expanded into something close to a full-scale robotic air war, complemented by [cross-border](#) helicopter [attacks](#), CIA-funded “[kill teams](#)” of Afghan proxy forces, as well as boots-on-the-ground [missions](#) by elite special operations forces, including the [SEAL raid](#) that killed Osama bin Laden.

✖ The CIA has conducted clandestine intelligence and surveillance [missions](#) in Pakistan, too, though its role may, in the future, be less important, thanks to Pentagon mission creep. In April, in fact, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta [announced](#) the creation of a new CIA-like espionage agency within the Pentagon called the Defense Clandestine Service. According to the *Washington Post*, its aim is to expand “the military's espionage efforts beyond war zones.”

Over the last decade, the very notion of war zones has become remarkably muddled, mirroring the blurring of the missions and activities of the CIA and Pentagon. Analyzing the new agency and the “broader convergence trend” between Department of Defense and CIA missions, the *Post* noted that the “blurring is also evident in the organizations' upper ranks. Panetta previously served as CIA director, and that post is currently held by retired four-star Army Gen. David H. Petraeus.”

Not to be outdone, last year the State Department, once the seat of diplomacy, continued on its [long march to militarization](#) (and marginalization) when it agreed to pool some of its resources with the Pentagon to create the [Global Security Contingency Fund](#). That program will allow the Defense Department even greater say in how aid from Washington will flow to proxy forces in places like Yemen and the Horn of Africa.

One thing is certain: American war-making (along with its spies and its diplomats) is heading ever deeper into “the shadows.” Expect yet more clandestine operations in ever more places with, of course, ever more potential for blowback in the years ahead.

### Shedding Light on “the Dark Continent”

One locale likely to see an influx of Pentagon spies in the coming years is Africa. Under President Obama, operations on the continent have accelerated far [beyond the](#) more [limited interventions](#) of the [Bush years](#). Last year’s war in Libya; a regional drone campaign with missions run out of [airports and bases](#) in Djibouti, [Ethiopia](#), and the Indian Ocean archipelago nation of Seychelles; a flotilla of [30 ships](#) in that ocean supporting regional operations; a multi-pronged military and CIA campaign against militants in Somalia, including [intelligence operations](#), training for Somali agents, [secret prisons](#), [helicopter attacks](#), and U.S. [commando raids](#); a massive influx of cash for counterterrorism operations across [East Africa](#); a possible [old-fashioned air war](#), carried out on the sly in the region using manned aircraft; [tens of millions](#) of dollars in arms for allied mercenaries and African troops; and a special ops [expeditionary force](#) (bolstered by [State Department experts](#)) dispatched to help capture or kill Lord’s Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony and his senior commanders, operating in Uganda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the [Central African Republic](#) (where U.S. Special Forces now have a new [base](#)) only begins to scratch the surface of Washington’s fast-expanding plans and activities in the region.

Even less well known are other U.S. military efforts designed to train African forces for operations now considered integral to American interests on the continent. These include, for example, a mission by elite Force Recon Marines from the Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force 12 (SPMAGTF-12) to train soldiers from the Uganda People’s Defense Force, which supplies the majority of troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia.

Earlier this year, Marines from SPMAGTF-12 also trained soldiers from the Burundi National Defense Force, the second-largest contingent in Somalia; sent trainers into Djibouti (where the U.S. already maintains a major Horn of Africa base at Camp Lemonier); and traveled to Liberia where they focused on teaching riot-control techniques to Liberia’s military as part of an otherwise State Department spearheaded effort to rebuild that force.

The U.S. is also [conducting](#) counterterrorism training and equipping militaries in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Niger, and Tunisia. In addition, U.S. Africa Command (Africom) has 14 major joint-training exercises planned for 2012, including operations in Morocco, Cameroon, Gabon, Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho, Senegal, and what may become the Pakistan of Africa, Nigeria.

Even this, however, doesn’t encompass the full breadth of U.S. training and advising missions in Africa. To take an example not on Africom’s list, this spring the U.S. brought together 11 nations, including Cote d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Liberia, Mauritania, and Sierra Leone to take part in a maritime training exercise code-named Saharan Express 2012.

### Back in the Backyard

Since its founding, the United States has often meddled close to home, treating the Caribbean as its private lake and intervening at will throughout Latin America. During the Bush years, [with](#) some [notable](#) exceptions, Washington’s interest in America’s “backyard” took a backseat to wars farther from home. Recently, however, the Obama administration

has been ramping up operations south of the border using its new formula. This has meant Pentagon [drone missions](#) deep inside Mexico to aid that country's battle against the drug cartels, while CIA agents and civilian operatives from the Department of Defense were [dispatched to Mexican military bases](#) to take part in the country's drug war.

In 2012, the Pentagon has also ramped up its anti-drug operations in Honduras. Working out of [Forward Operating Base Mocomon](#) and other remote camps there, the U.S. military is supporting Honduran operations by way of the methods it honed in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, U.S. forces have taken part in joint operations with Honduran troops as part of a training mission dubbed Beyond the Horizon 2012; Green Berets have been [assisting](#) Honduran Special Operations forces in anti-smuggling operations; and a Drug Enforcement Administration Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team, originally created to disrupt the poppy trade in Afghanistan, has joined forces with Honduras's Tactical Response Team, that country's most elite counternarcotics unit. A glimpse of these operations made the news recently when DEA agents, flying in an American helicopter, were [involved](#) in an aerial attack on [civilians](#) that killed two men and two pregnant women in the remote Mosquito Coast region.

Less visible have been U.S. efforts in Guyana, where Special Operation Forces have been training local troops in heliborne air assault techniques. "This is the first time we have had this type of exercise involving Special Operations Forces of the United States on such a grand scale," Colonel Bruce Lovell of the Guyana Defense Force told a U.S. public affairs official earlier this year. "It gives us a chance to validate ourselves and see where we are, what are our shortcomings."

The U.S. military has been similarly active elsewhere in Latin America, concluding training exercises in Guatemala, sponsoring "[partnership-building](#)" missions in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Peru, and Panama, and reaching an agreement to carry out 19 "activities" with the Colombian army over the next year, including joint military exercises.

#### Still in the Middle of the Middle East

Despite the end of the Iraq and Libyan wars, a coming drawdown of forces in Afghanistan, and copious public announcements about its national security [pivot](#) toward Asia, Washington is by no means withdrawing from the Greater Middle East. In addition to continuing operations in [Afghanistan](#), the U.S. has consistently been at work training [allied troops](#), building up military bases, and brokering weapons sales and arms transfers to despots in the region from Bahrain to Yemen.

In fact, Yemen, like its neighbor, Somalia, across the Gulf of Aden, has become a laboratory for Obama's wars. There, the U.S. is carrying out its signature new brand of warfare with "black ops" troops like the SEALs and the Army's Delta Force undoubtedly conducting kill/capture missions, while "white" forces like the Green Berets and Rangers are [training](#) indigenous troops, and robot planes [hunt and kill](#) members of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, possibly assisted by an even more secret contingent of [manned aircraft](#).

The Middle East has also become the somewhat unlikely poster-region for another emerging facet of the Obama doctrine: cyberwar efforts. In a category-blurring speaking engagement, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [surfaced](#) at the recent Special Operations Forces Industry Conference in Florida where she gave a [speech](#) talking up her department's eagerness to join in the new American way of war. "We need Special Operations Forces who are as

comfortable drinking tea with tribal leaders as raiding a terrorist compound,” she told the crowd. “We also need diplomats and development experts who are up to the job of being your partners.”

Clinton then took the opportunity to [tout](#) her agency’s online efforts, aimed at websites used by al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen. When al-Qaeda recruitment messages appeared on the latter, [she said](#), “our team plastered the same sites with altered versions... that showed the toll al-Qaeda attacks have taken on the Yemeni people.” She further noted that this information-warfare mission was carried out by experts at State’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications with assistance, not surprisingly, from the military and the U.S. Intelligence Community.

These modest on-line efforts join [more potent](#) methods of [cyberwar](#) being employed by the [Pentagon](#) and the CIA, including the recently [revealed](#) “Olympic Games,” a program of sophisticated attacks on computers in Iran’s nuclear enrichment facilities engineered and unleashed by the National Security Agency (NSA) and Unit 8200, Israeli’s equivalent of the NSA. As with other facets of the new way of war, these efforts were begun under the Bush administration but significantly accelerated under the current president, who became the first American commander-in-chief to order sustained cyberattacks designed to cripple another country’s infrastructure.

#### From Brushfires to Wildfires

Across the globe from Central and South America to Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, the Obama administration is working out its formula for a new American way of war. In its pursuit, the Pentagon and its increasingly militarized government partners are drawing on everything from classic precepts of colonial warfare to the latest technologies.

The United States is an imperial power chastened by more than 10 years of failed, heavy-footprint wars. It is hobbled by a hollowing-out economy, and inundated with hundreds of thousands of recent veterans — a [staggering 45%](#) of the troops who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq — suffering from service-related disabilities who will require ever more expensive care. No wonder the current combination of special ops, drones, spy games, civilian soldiers, cyberwarfare, and proxy fighters sounds like a safer, saner brand of war-fighting. At first blush, it may even look like a panacea for America’s national security ills. In reality, it may be anything but.

The new light-footprint Obama doctrine actually seems to be making war an ever more attractive and seemingly easy option — a point emphasized recently by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace. “I worry about speed making it too easy to employ force,” [said Pace](#) when asked about recent efforts to make it simpler to deploy Special Operations Forces abroad. “I worry about speed making it too easy to take the easy answer — let’s go whack them with special operations — as opposed to perhaps a more laborious answer for perhaps a better long-term solution.”

As a result, the new American way of war holds great potential for unforeseen entanglements and serial blowback. Starting or fanning brushfire wars on several continents could lead to raging wildfires that spread unpredictably and prove difficult, if not impossible, to quench.

By their very nature, small military engagements tend to get larger, and wars tend to

spread beyond borders. By definition, military action tends to have unforeseen consequences. Those who doubt this need only look back to 2001, when three low-tech attacks on a single day set in motion a decade-plus of war that has spread across the globe. The response to that one day began with a war in Afghanistan, that spread to Pakistan, detoured to Iraq, popped up in Somalia and Yemen, and so on. Today, veterans of those U.S. interventions find themselves trying to replicate their dubious successes in places like Mexico and Honduras, the Central Africa Republic and the Congo.

[History](#) demonstrates that the U.S. is not very good at [winning wars](#), having gone without victory in any major conflict since 1945. Smaller interventions have been a mixed bag with modest victories in places like Panama and Grenada and ignominious outcomes in Lebanon (in the 1980s) and Somalia (in the 1990s), to name a few.

The trouble is, it's hard to tell what an intervention will grow up to be — until it's too late. While they followed different paths, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq all began relatively small, before growing large and ruinous. Already, the outlook for the new Obama doctrine seems far from rosy, despite the good press it's getting inside Washington's Beltway.

What looks today like a formula for easy power projection that will further U.S. imperial interests on the cheap could soon prove to be an unmitigated disaster — one that likely won't be apparent until it's too late.

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