

Guidelines When Considering Committing U.S. Forces

**Is a proposed action truly necessary?**

- ***A Good Reason:*** If U.S. lives are going to be put at risk, whatever is proposed to be done must be in the U.S. national interest. If people could be killed, ours or others, the U.S. must have a darn good reason.
- ***Diplomacy:*** All instruments of national power should be engaged before, during and after any possible use of force. The interaction between effective diplomacy and the potential use or use of force can be a powerful influence.
- ***Basis for the Action:*** In fashioning a clear statement of the underpinning for the action, avoid arguments of convenience. They can be useful at the outset to gain support, but they will be deadly later. Just as the risks of taking action must be carefully considered, so too the risk of inaction needs to be weighed.

**Is the proposed action achievable?**

- ***Achievable:*** When the U.S. commits force, the task should be achievable—at acceptable risk. It must be something the U.S. is capable of accomplishing. We need to understand our limitations. The record is clear; there are some things the U.S. simply cannot accomplish.
- ***Clear Goals:*** To the extent possible, there should be clear, well-considered and well-understood goals as to the purpose of the engagement and what would constitute success, so we can know when we have achieved our goals. To those who would change what is falls the responsibility of helping provide something better. It is important to understand that responsibility and accept it.
- ***Command Structure:*** The command structure should be clear, not complex—not a collective command structure where a committee makes decisions. If the U.S. needs or prefers a coalition to achieve its goals, which it most often will, have a clear understanding with coalition partners that they will do what might be needed to achieve the agreed goals. Avoid trying so hard to persuade others to join a coalition that it compromises our goals or jeopardizes the command structure. Generally, the mission will determine the coalition.

**Is it worth it?**

- ***Lives at Risk:*** If an engagement is worth doing, the U.S. and coalition partners should recognize that lives will be put at risk.

***Resources:*** The military capabilities needed to achieve the agreed goals must be available and not committed or subject to call elsewhere halfway through the engagement. Even with a broad coalition, the U.S. cannot do everything everywhere at once.

**Public Support:** If public support is weak at the outset, U.S. leadership must be willing to invest the political capital to marshal support to sustain the effort for whatever period of time may be required. If there is a risk of casualties, that fact should be acknowledged at the outset, rather than allowing the public to believe an engagement can be executed antiseptically, on the cheap, with few casualties.

- **Impact Elsewhere:** Before committing to an engagement, consider the implications of the decision for the U.S. in other parts of the world—if we prevail, if we fail, or if we decide not to act. U.S. actions or inactions in one region are read around the world and contribute favorably or unfavorably to the U.S. deterrent and influence. Think through the precedent that a proposed action, or inaction, would establish.

#### **If there is to be action--**

- **Act Early:** If it is worth doing, U.S. leadership should make a judgment as to when diplomacy has failed and act forcefully, early, during the pre-crisis period, to try to alter the behavior of others and to prevent the conflict. If that fails, be willing and prepared to act decisively to use whatever force is necessary to prevail, plus some.
- **Unrestricted Options:** In working to fashion a coalition or trying to persuade Congress, the public, the UN or other countries to support an action, the National Command Authorities should not dumb down what is needed by promising not to do things (i.e., not to use ground forces, not to bomb below 15,000 feet, not to risk lives, not to permit collateral damage, etc.). That may simplify the task for the enemy and make the task more difficult. Leadership should not set arbitrary deadlines as to when the U.S. will disengage, or the enemy can simply wait us out.

#### **Finally--**

- **Honesty:** U.S. leadership must be brutally honest with itself, the Congress, the public and coalition partners. Do not make the effort sound even marginally easier or less costly than it could become. Preserving U.S. credibility requires that we promise less, or no more, than we are sure we can deliver. It is a great deal easier to get into something than it is to get out of it!

#### **Note:**

**Guidelines, Not Rules:** While these guidelines are worth considering, they should not be considered rules to inhibit the U.S. from acting in our national interest. Rather, they are offered as a checklist to assure that when the U.S. is considering the use of force, it does so with a full appreciation of our responsibilities, the risks, and the opportunities. Our future promises to offer a variety of possible engagements. The value of this checklist will depend on the wisdom with which it is applied.

Decisions on military engagement always will be based on less than perfect information, often under extreme pressure of time. These guidelines can be helpful not in providing specific answers, but rather in helping to frame and organize available information.

