

A major theme of the US and Western commentariat in recent months has been the way in which so-called "grown-ups" from the Washington foreign and security policy establishment have stepped in to control the "reckless and irresponsible" President Trump. Given the record of that establishment over the past two decades, one might be pardoned for asking which of the parties to this arrangement is the more irresponsible, says Anatol Lieven.

Two things however are indubitably true: that for the past 12 years or so the US security establishment has acted severely to constrain the foreign policies of three successive presidents; and that more than ever before this security establishment is dominated by the US uniformed military. Today, not only the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Adviser but the White House Chief of Staff as well are all generals or ex-generals who reflect absolutely the consensus of the US military high command. Another general who defied that consensus – Mike Flynn - was rapidly removed, in part through behind-the-scenes pressure from his former military colleagues.

The power of the military comes in part from sheer financial weight. The military budget is more than twenty times the annual State Department and foreign aid budgets combined. US military spending is critical to maintaining key areas of high-tech industry – indeed, it is a sort of US industrial plan that (in a country whose conservative elites hate state planning) dare not speak its name. Military influence also comes from the fact that while public trust in US civilian institutions has plummeted in recent years, according to opinion polls more than 70 percent of Americans still place high trust in the US military. Amid the intense partisan divisions of US politics, the military remains one of the few institutions both parties have to take seriously.

Both presidents Obama and Trump have sought to exploit this popularity for their own purposes. By leaving George Bush's Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates (highly popular with the military high command) in office, Obama sought to deflect criticism from the establishment. Trump has appointed generals in an effort to deflect attacks on his supposed subservience to Russia, and generally to correct the impression of chaos and incompetence in his administration. The military in turn forms part of a wider US foreign and security establishment which – except for particular moments of crisis – dominates policymaking and policy discussion whichever political party is in power.

What are the implications of this military influence for US foreign policy? This is certainly not the straightforward bellicosity of the high commands of European nations before 1914, for example. Under Bill Clinton, it was rightly said that the US generals were "bellicose only about their budgets", and the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan have certainly reinforced that. Bob Gates, very much the Pentagon's man, famously told the officer cadets of West Point in 2011 that ""In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should have his head examined." During the Georgian-Russian War of August 2008, Gates blocked any thought of despatching US troops to Georgia, even by way of sending a signal to Russia to retreat. In March of that same year, Admiral William Fallon – widely tipped as the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff - was forced to resign after criticising apparent Bush administration plans for an attack on Iran. Backed by Gates, the next chief, Admiral Michael Mullen, took the same line – and no attack on Iran occurred. Under Obama, the next chief, General Martin Dempsey, went to Israel with the same message.

Over the past two decades, by far the most bellicose members of the US establishment have been not the military, but the neo-conservatives – men who with very rare exceptions never served in the military themselves, never saw any member of their families fight, and are accordingly despised by many American soldiers. The neo-cons moved in a body to Hillary Clinton during the last election campaign.

Does this mean that the commanders of the US uniformed military are in fact the responsible "grown-ups" of current Washingtonian legend? Yes and no. On the one hand, ever since Vietnam they have not looked for serious war, and will on occasions step in to stop military adventures that they regard as really dangerous or unwise (the period of national hysteria between 9/11 and the start of Iraq's descent into chaos were an exception). They are also on the whole more moderate and responsible in their public language than the civilian politicians – except on issues concerning Russia, which seem to have an almost spiritual power to loosen tongues and cause absurd behaviour in Washington – spiritual in the sense of whisky or vodka, not the religious sense.

But the US generals are at the same time the products of military institutions, with extremely strong cultures, traditions and doctrines, which in turn fuse with wider ideologies of American nationalism. One such tradition is a determination not to be seen to lose wars once they are in them – demonstrated in recent years by the way in which the military blocked the desire of both Obama and Trump to withdraw from Afghanistan. This in itself is an entirely honourable attitude common to all self-respecting militaries. The problem is that in Afghanistan as in

Vietnam, it can lead the military to insist on fighting on long after the real justifications for this in terms of national interest and even wider strategic interest have disappeared.

When it comes to strategy and diplomacy, the military are naturally enough focused on military alliances – which almost by definition are directed against other countries, and structured to think in terms of zero-sum competition. This has been strongly reflected in the behaviour of NATO and the US military towards Russia since the end of the Cold War – behaviour characteristic of the US establishment as a whole, and heavily influenced by the fact that the great US security institutions may have originated during the four years of World War II, but they achieved their mature forms during the 40 years of the Cold War against Moscow.

But the US military relationship with Russia, though deeply hostile, also embodies red lines that are well understood by both sides. As demonstrated in both 2008 and 2014, no-one in the US high command is going to provoke actual war with Russia, least of all for such pathetic prizes as Georgia or Ukraine. It is very striking that amidst all the hysterical rhetoric about Russia being the greatest threat to the USA, the actual deployment of new US forces to Europe has been minimal. The Far East remains the US military's overwhelming focus.

China is a different matter. It is not that US commanders are seeking actual war with China either; but the central role of the military and military alliances in Obama and Hilary Clinton's "Pivot to Asia" – a very lightly veiled euphemism for the containment of China – means that the USA and the US military risk being gradually trapped into positions which it will be impossible to maintain without war, and from which it will be impossible to withdraw without the open sense of defeat and humiliation that the US military so detests.

This is all the more so because the USA either has or is developing alliances with other very powerful states with their own territorial disputes with China – alliances that the USA could not abandon without serious damage to its international supremacy. Georgia and Ukraine are not worth fighting for. Japan and India may be a very different matter. And as with the whole of the US establishment in general, the US military is absolutely dedicated to a continuation of US global hegemony, or "leadership" if you prefer a softer term.

These interests and constraints mean that under all the shouting, a large part of the actual foreign and security policies of the second Bush administration, the Obama administration, and the Trump administration have been remarkably similar. When it comes to classical security issues, the only serious divergence was Obama's nuclear deal with Iran – something that was backed behind the scenes by the US high command, as a logical consequence of their having abandoned the option of a military attack on Iran's nuclear installations.

The great differences in policy have come over issues that are not related to traditional military areas of responsibility, and in which domestic political and economic ideologies are strongly engaged: trade, migration and above all climate change. Here, the three administrations have had radically different approaches (on trade and migration, Trump has gone against Bush's policies as well as Obama's).

US military analysts have in fact raised the issue of climate change and its consequences as a future security threat to the USA. But both the limits set on the military under the US Constitution and the institutional interests of the military in focusing on traditional security issues mean that the military has so far been both unwilling and unable strongly to draw public attention to this issue, any more than it has been willing or able to call for a reconfiguration of US strategy in the Middle East.

And this is a tragedy for the USA and for mankind. For given the feral obscurantism of the Republican Party (not just Trump) and the paralysis of the American political system, only the US military is in a position to bring some rationality concerning this threat to America and the world back into the US public debate. But the US political system does not permit this; and the military itself is far more comfortable with replaying the Cold War against Russia and China. In the case of Russia, US generals and security officials can almost literally take reports criticising America's NATO allies' lack of military preparedness against Russia from 1967 or 1977, change the date on the top and the name on the bottom, and recycle them for the present "debate" with Europe on the subject.

What bureaucrat could possibly ask for an easier or more comfortable life?

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