“I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”

Perhaps the most indelible public spat between a U.S. diplomat and the U.S. military remains that between U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin
Powell. Their argument might seem odd today, but at the time Albright, the diplomat, was arguing for the need to deploy U.S. armed forces in support of humanitarian intervention in the Balkans. Powell, the soldier, was adamant that U.S. armed forces should not be used for such contingencies. Powell summed up his views on the proper use of U.S. armed forces in an article for the journal Foreign Affairs entitled “U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead.” Subsequently known as the “Powell Doctrine,” the article highlighted a U.S. foreign policy dilemma which has never been resolved: if standing idly by is intolerable, as Albright insisted, is intervening with armed force something that will generally advance or hurt U.S. interests? Can military intervention succeed, and if so, how limited might the circumstances be?

Powell’s vision of a well-intentioned military intervention leading to disaster became real in Somalia in 1993, where a humanitarian intervention morphed into a publicly disastrous failure to capture a warlord, the deaths of 18 U.S. special operations forces, and the capture of a U.S. helicopter pilot. This operation went wrong for many reasons, but one point to consider: There was no diplomatic support for U.S. forces going in. The collapse of the Siad Barre government in 1991 had resulted in both a complex new political mosaic, and the flight of international embassies, including the U.S., from Somalia’s capital, Mogadishu.

A decade later and things got much worse. In 2001, in response to 9-11, the United States led a military intervention to punish (and ouster) the Afghan Taliban. The lack of a coast or amenable bordering allies forced the U.S. to rely on special operations forces. In that fight, operating in their traditional role as support for local actors, the United States and its allies rapidly
dismantled the Taliban, whose decade of brutality and corruption had deprived them of the base of popular support needed to mount anything other than a conventional defense. Short term it proved a major victory, but long term? An unqualified disaster; largely because the George W. Bush administration made no use of U.S. diplomatic support in planning a post-win strategy.

In 2003, and against the advice of not only senior U.S., but allied diplomats, the George W. Bush administration committed the U.S. military to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Although the military intervention seemed to go well in the short term, the president did not assign a senior diplomat to the important project of Iraq’s post-war reconstruction. Instead, the president chose L. Paul Bremer III — a man with limited knowledge of the Middle East, its peoples, politics, or history — to lead the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Again, bayonets had led the way, and brilliantly, but lack of diplomatic engagement led to insurgency, terrorism, and civil war.

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This progression is important because it underlines an intensifying trend: the reduction of U.S. leadership in global politics to what I term kinetic diplomacy: diplomacy by armed force. Two statistics make this clear. As of May 2018, the Trump administration has appointed 75 of 188 ambassadors, while it has deployed special operations forces to 149 countries (an increase from 138 during the Obama administration in 2016). Put differently, while U.S. ambassadors are operating in one-third of the world’s countries, U.S. special operators are active in three-fourths. And while it is true that the
United States maintains embassies in countries without an ambassador, and that not all deployed special operators are on combat missions, the symbolism matters: “killing yes, diplomacy no.”

The recent Niger debacle of November 2017 — one very public example of the costs of kinetic diplomacy — was a cascade of failures, including failures of planning, coordination, intelligence, and above all, strategy. With sound strategy we will still see mistakes, setbacks, and losses; but the possibility of a long-term positive outcome is real. With bad strategy, even if everyone in a chain of command does everything right, the probability of a long-term positive outcome is zero. U.S. strategy used to include many more tools in its foreign policy toolbox. In Niger, as in an increasing number of U.S. foreign policy initiatives worldwide, emphasis on targeted aid and development, and on political reforms needed to sustain long-term positive outcomes, has declined and been increasingly replaced with a “bayonets-first-and-repeat-as-needed” strategy. This raises the serious question of whether we are likely to see more, rather than fewer “Niger debacles” going forward; and whether we want kinetic diplomacy to continue to be the face of American leadership abroad.

Kinetic diplomacy is different from what many have called “coercive diplomacy.” As Alexander L. George outlined in his theoretical introduction in 1993, in coercive diplomacy, a state uses a mix of diplomatic resources to threaten a costly escalation unless the target complies. Success often turns on the credibility of the threats (a core but often unrecognized contribution of conventional diplomacy to statecraft). In kinetic diplomacy, a state uses primarily military resources to coerce by violence, in order to avoid a costly escalation. These armed forces — drones; and increasingly, special
operations forces — succeed in their missions due to their ability to kill stealthily and without a large or visible military footprint. Special operations forces acquire in-depth understanding of their targets. They engage adversaries with a mix of discriminate violence and incentives and are trained to do so while remaining undetected; often obviating the need for larger-scale violence. Unfortunately, even with their amazing skill sets, there remain serious limits to how much special operations forces can accomplish — especially long-term — without conventional diplomatic support.

The United States once used a wider mix of tools in its foreign policy toolbox: diplomacy, economic power, the entertainment industry, foreign aid and development assistance, an unrivaled military, and — of course — a legacy of leadership by example when it came to popular sovereignty and the rule of law. And immediately after the Cold War, the United States committed itself to more multilateral efforts and joint operations. Yet as 2018 unfolds, we see the fruition of a clear trend which dates from 2001: the reduction of U.S. foreign policy tools to a unilateral hammer. This is likely to accelerate further under John Bolton’s tenure as national security advisor.

I leave to others the story of dwindling U.S. leadership by example (e.g. the Abu Ghraib prison scandal of April 2004, which proclaimed to the world “others shouldn’t violate the laws of war but it’s ok for us to do so”), the erosion of U.S. economic power (e.g. since 2012 the U.S. share of global gross domestic product has declined every year, from 16.21 percent to 15.29 percent in 2017, and it’s projected to decline to as much as 14.01 percent by 2022), its commitment to the rule of law (e.g. we have continued to see
extensions of key provisions of the 2001 Patriot Act, giving government special surveillance powers, and the Guantanamo Bay detention center remains active), and the important and under-rated influence of Hollywood. I focus instead on the political implications of two important and related trends: first, the progressive hollowing out of the U.S. Department of State; and second, the concomitant expansion of both the pace of U.S. military interventions abroad, and the deployment of U.S. special operations forces in the service of those interventions.

The Advent of Kinetic Diplomacy

Core debates in U.S. foreign policy over the ideal mix of tools to achieve a specific political effect date back to the founding of the United States, but the most relevant today are those which took place at the end of World War II. The period between August 1945 and roughly 1949 was a liminal one for the United States. The country struggled with a resurgent Soviet Union and a precarious civil war in China; along with the novel prestige of postwar communists in Greece and other wartime allies beset by insurgencies in India, Indochina, Malaya, and Algeria (to cite but a few). Fresh from victory in Berlin and later Tokyo, U.S. foreign policy seemed suddenly to face a choice between two unpalatable strategic options.

The first — later dubbed “rollback” — would involve the use of all U.S. national resources, but in particular the U.S. military, to finish the war against evil dictatorships by attacking the Soviet Union and rolling it back from its hostile occupation of Eastern Europe. Rollback advocates argued that if the United States had sacrificed so much for freedom and justice, it could not stop and permit the enslavement of half of Europe to the “evil
empire” of the Soviet Union under Stalin. Furthermore, the United States military was better equipped, battle hardened, and had a huge airpower advantage (in particular the ability to deploy atomic weapons).

The second strategic option was “containment.” This was the brainchild of the State Department under the auspices of George F. Kennan who, in a now famous long telegram, argued that Stalin’s Soviet Union, while ideologically aggressive, remained pragmatic and profoundly insecure. Kennan argued, successfully it turned out, that the U.S. and its allies could avert World War III by simply preventing the Soviet Union from subverting other governments (containing it) and by continuing the hard work of economic reconstruction and political reform needed to undermine the appeal of communism as an alternative to principled market capitalism: to lead by example.

Proponents of Kennan’s position argued that the military option would not work, because the United States had already demobilized in Europe while the Soviets were already deployed in massive numbers in striking distance of Paris and the rest of Western Europe. President Harry Truman knew that the U.S. inventory of atomic weapons was small and had been assured by Stalin that having already suffered so much, even atomic weapons could not coerce the Soviets into withdrawal to pre-war borders. Finally, although today it is commonplace to cite World War II as a great example of unshakeable national unity, Truman and his advisors understood clearly that the U.S. public would not support another major conventional war unless the continental United States was directly threatened. This insight led to the Truman Doctrine: the now habitual frightening of the U.S. public
in order to rally at least economic support for military aid abroad, which Truman used successfully to gain support for aid to the government of Greece in its fight with the Greek communists in 1947.

Truman ultimately set the United States on a path toward containment; but the move, though successful in both preventing World War III and in bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union, left a bitter taste in the mouths of the country’s security hawks and ideologues. It is crucial to note that the victory of containment as U.S. policy was never more than marginal over rollback, and that advocates of a more militant U.S. foreign policy against “evildoers” and dictators remained poised for the opportunity to take over.

Although precursors of special operations forces existed since the country’s founding, competition with the Soviet Union explains why special operations forces were formalized in 1952. They were to serve as a buttress against an impending Soviet invasion of western Europe. The mission morphed over the next decade as the struggle between the western and eastern blocs extended beyond Europe. It was Vietnam in particular that shifted the mission from one of a defensive strike force to a training force in the arts of unconventional warfare and counterinsurgency. From there special operators deployed beyond Europe and South Asia and into Latin America. It was only a matter of time before they became truly global.

That opportunity came on Sept. 11, 2001, when a group of terrorists claiming to represent Islam hijacked four planes and crashed three of them into targets in New York and Washington D.C. The new U.S. president, George W. Bush, had had little experience in foreign policy, and his chief domestic and foreign policy agendas up until then had been tax cuts and
retrenchment, respectively. The 9/11 attacks changed this. The U.S. president declared war on “terror,” without specifying a time frame, geographic scope, or clear set of guidelines for fighting and winning that war. He further declared that the United States would not wait to be attacked again, but would carry the fight to the terrorist’s habitat abroad, starting with Afghanistan, the home base for the radical splinter group of global Salafi jihadists known as al-Qaeda.

It remains critical to remind readers at this point that the use of armed force is particularly popular both after suffering an organized lethal attack from others claiming to be soldiers, and/or when those attackers are thought to be irrational. Post-revolutionary diplomacy is often complicated by the fact that any act of violence against a state tends to tar rebels with the brush of irrationality. This was as true of the Russian Revolution of 1917 as it was of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The “irrational adversary” meme tends to make it seem sensible to reduce ideal options from a broad spectrum of tools (in particular, diplomacy) to the hammer: If we cannot reach their minds, the argument goes, we can at least (or only) destroy their bodies. In the case of the Soviet Union, the United States was able to re-imagine the epicenter of communism away from being evil and irrational revolutionaries towards being an evil and rational state; largely because that state came into the early possession of atomic (later thermonuclear) weapons. In the case of Iran, which has yet to acquire thermonuclear weapons and remains more relevant to post-2001 U.S. foreign policy, the United States — though presented over the years with many opportunities to establish a more positive relationship with Iran
— has proven incapable of achieving the same re-imagination. From Washington's perspective, Iran remains a state hijacked by evil, hostage-taking, messianic tyrants whose rationality remains a question mark.

The 9/11 attacks remain a turning point in U.S. foreign policy history for just this reason: In a world where states no longer seem the sole adversary of concern, and where states that are adversaries no longer threaten the United States with lethal force (but on the contrary, threaten the U.S. in critical but non-lethal ways), adversaries seem to fall naturally into the category of the irrational. If it's true that the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Iran and Hizballah, Chechen separatists, Hamas, Boko Haram, and the like are irrational, then what is the point of diplomacy? How can we bargain with those who have shown by their actions that they are irrational, even inhuman?

The men who hijacked four passenger airliners on 9/11 believed themselves to be soldiers in a holy war against those they perceived to be at war with Islam. At the time, their beliefs represented only a tiny minority of that faith's adherents and were widely repudiated by Islamic clerics and scholars across the Muslim world. But in choosing a means of attack which involved their deliberate suicide, the 9/11 hijackers made it easy to characterize their beliefs — indeed themselves — as irrational; as crazy. It was a perfect storm. In 2001, Russia's Vladimir Putin had not yet set the Russian Federation on a policy of axiomatically thwarting U.S. interests, and China, though economically waxing, had only just permitted itself to speak of “China's rise.” Many spoke of an American “unipolar moment,” and U.S. foreign policy hawks, the frustrated heirs of rollback — waiting in
the wings to flex U.S. military muscle in the service of the global good — found their moment. Taken together, this is why 9/11 became ground zero for kinetic diplomacy — “diplomacy” by armed force alone.

The budget of the State Department has been anemic, while the budget for the Department of Defense — at a time when there were no peer adversary states — increased. The United States also became embroiled in not one, but two unwinnable wars. Its early successes against the Taliban in Afghanistan were later swept away in an ill-fated attempt to establish a stable centralized government in Kabul. And its defeat of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq led not to a stable democratic Iraq, but to civil war, the rise of the Islamic State, and an increase in Iran’s influence across the Middle East. Syria is only the latest casualty. And the fates of each respective war — the lessons learned — would have important implications for today’s kinetic diplomacy.

**Asymmetric Conflict Theory and U.S. Special Operations Forces**

If 9/11 was ground zero for kinetic diplomacy, and kinetic diplomacy is the contemporary manifestation of rollback as default U.S. foreign policy, why the increase in U.S. reliance on special operations forces rather than Stormin’ Norman Schwartzkopf-type conventional armed forces?

To answer that question, we need to briefly review international relations theory on asymmetric conflict and do so in the context of the relative political costs to U.S. political elites in the use of armed force abroad.

Asymmetric conflict theory as we know it today has its origins in the same period as the fight between rollback and containment: the late 1940s and the 1950s. The puzzle to be explained then was how indigenous insurgents
were able to defeat nominally much more powerful, advanced-industrial states like Britain, France, and later, the United States and the Soviet Union. Up until the early 1970s, international relations theorists did not have a good general explanation for how the world's “Davids” beat the world's “Goliaths.” But in the 1970s and 80s, hints started to emerge. First, there was Andrew J.R. Mack’s “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars” (1975). In the mid-80s, Eliot Cohen (“Constraints on America’s Conduct of Small Wars,” 1984) and Andrew Krepinevich (The Army and Vietnam, 1986) argued that the United States had lost in Vietnam — and was poised to lose in the future — because it had used the wrong sort of military against essentially nationalist-inspired insurgents. This raised a critical and unanswered question: why was the United States spending trillions of dollars to maintain major conventional armed forces — forces useful only against the armed forces of other states — in a world in which interstate war was increasingly unlikely? More to the point, and assuming major conventional war fighting forces were still critical to U.S. national security, what sort of armed forces were best suited to sub-state adversaries, such as communist insurgents or terrorists?

In “How the Weak Win Wars” (2001, 2005), Ivan Arreguín-Toft answered these questions with a theory of asymmetric conflict outcomes: a general explanation of how Davids beat Goliaths and why from 1950 to 2000, Davids had won a majority of these conflicts, when previously Goliaths had prevailed. Arreguín-Toft argued that material power, while remaining critical, was not enough to predict conflict outcomes, but could be enhanced or diminished by the interaction of each actor’s choice of strategy. He called this “strategic interaction theory.” His research showed that when strong actors go directly after weak actors who avoid battle (say,
by using a conventional military force against a guerrilla insurgency), they become both frustrated (tempting them to escalation) and politically vulnerable (this was Mack’s core contribution); both because many civilians get hurt, and because the clock is ticking and deploying armed forces abroad is costly in terms of cash and reputation. What then should a strong actor, such as the United States in its future small wars or counter terrorist actions, do?

The answer was there already but remained largely unnoticed or deliberately obscured by a conventional U.S. military whose views on special operations have invariably remained hostile.

All major branches of the U.S. armed forces have special operators, but in the U.S. Army, these got their start as the famous Green Berets (1952 to the present; though the distinctive beret was not formalized until after 1961). As mentioned above, the original mission of the Green Berets was to serve as the nucleus of a guerrilla resistance in Europe in the event that the Soviet Union attacked and occupied Western Europe. As such, Green Berets were not only elite warriors in terms of physical fitness, weapons expertise, and tactical skills, but oriented as teachers and instructors who would show occupied peoples how to establish secure communications, find food, organize community defenses, and impose costs on an occupying force.

By the 1960s, and the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, Green Berets worked primarily in four-man teams, not only in their capacity as teachers and instructors but, increasingly, as counterinsurgency forces. Their skills in language, their ability to form trusted relationships with locals, and their ability to acquire critically needed resources for their clients made them highly effective counterinsurgents when used for that purpose.
In addition, and unlike conventional armed forces, special operators rely on carefully vetted local intelligence to select targets, and they use weapons that strike only the selected targets. Above all, they are selected for their ability to think and work independently; and it is this quality of initiative and independent thinking (along with a lack of heavy weapons) which most often makes them the target of conventional military ire or derision. Conventional militaries work best with clear lines of authority; whereas special operators work best when they are given a mission, deployed, and then allowed to work through the best way to accomplish that mission without further guidance. And because special operators work in the shadows, they most often accomplish their very difficult missions without fanfare or public knowledge. This move toward special operators was further aided by the development and deployment of drones post-9/11; again, a quiet kinetic force not involving much public scrutiny or debate, but better in that for special operators collateral damage is limited.

In short, as argued by scholars, special operators are the ideal armed forces to counter a sub-state threat; whether that threat be insurgents in a civil war or terrorists. More to the point, however, their working in the shadows makes it possible to intervene militarily without the threat of public discussion or backlash. It facilitates the sort of “gray zone warfare” of which the United States habitually (and correctly) accuses the Russian Federation.

But special operations effectiveness comes at several major costs. First, the distribution of young people capable of the demanding physical and psychological work of special operations is limited. Second, training these forces offers little in the way of political district employment or economic
benefit: compare the number of salaries attached to Fort Bragg (where the Green Berets are trained) to Groton, Connecticut (where the Seawolf submarine was made and maintained). This means that special operations forces often find competing for resources in Congress with conventional armed forces challenging at best. Third, working in the shadows, where special operators are most effective, does not make for many “marquee moments,” and when they do experience a marquee moment — such as SEAL Team Six’s killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 — this threatens them with pressure to undertake operations in full public view (thus making them, paradoxically, less effective even as it facilitates attracting additional resources). Fourth and most critically, when special operators work well, their success takes time; and time is a serious cost to an impatient President or public.

So, while special operators remain ideal counterinsurgency forces, their success depends critically on a patient U.S. public, and on a broader U.S. foreign policy which leverages a broad mix of tools to support a positive outcome. By themselves, special operations forces can only address a threat’s symptoms, not its causes. Their great strength is that they are the only type of U.S. armed force (drones cannot do it) that can address symptoms without inflaming causes.

2017: U.S. Special Operations Forces as U.S. Department of State?

If it is true that special operations forces are ideal at engaging threats to U.S. interests without attracting public attention or controversy, this would in large measure explain why U.S. deployments of special forces have continued to expand since 9/11, and have today reached a point of unsustainability, as well as questionable utility.
In May of 2017, Gen. Raymond A. Thomas, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, testified before Congress that global deployments of special operations forces had become “unsustainable.” Thomas added that since 9/11, “we’ve expanded the size of our force by almost 75% in order to take on mission-sets that are likely to endure.”

Special operations command (SOCOM) today totals some 70,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and support staff (to include civilians), of which on any given day about 8,000 are deployed across the globe. The core of SOCOM mission-sets has shifted from the original mission of helping indigenous occupied peoples resist oppression, to fighting VEOs, or violent extremist organizations. As General Thomas characterized it, “rather than a mere ‘break-glass-in-case-of-war’ force, we are now proactively engaged across the ‘battle space’ of the Geographic Combatant Commands ... providing key integrating and enabling capabilities to support their campaigns and operations.” As Thomas’s testimony makes clear, many in SOCOM view the Bush W-era policy of offense as national defense as a virtue.

But the difficulty is that the U.S. public, along with most of its representatives in Congress, have no way of knowing whether these deployments — though no doubt ideal as compared to the alternative of major conventional wars — are having a positive net effect. In order to know that we would need a fully functioning Department of State whose diplomats on the ground could help guide and inform ongoing and future special operations force deployments. The Trump administration’s hollowing out of the State Department — which is historically unprecedented — makes it progressively difficult to deal with the
underlying causes of the violent extremist organization threat, and to know whether kinetic diplomacy is helping or hurting U.S. and allied interests.

Arguably, this has led to pressure — not to restore the State Department — but to expand special operations forces. It has led to the use of special operations forces as a Department of State, and to the extent this becomes the new norm, it can only lead to a vicious circle: from more deployments to more deployments, and eventually to the breaking of special operations forces as we know it. Given that the United States needs to devote some resources to preparing for both conventional and unconventional conflicts, this only makes the United States more vulnerable.

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There is of course no question that many of those who seek to harm the United States and its allies will prove difficult or impossible to bargain with, but this does not make them irrational by default. It follows that dealing with what social scientists like myself often refer to as sub-state violence, or more recently, “countering violent extremism,” requires not only some violence (highly discriminate violence), but also a full range of other tools of statecraft and foreign policy, especially diplomatic support.

This is because many of those seeking violence and harm against states and their citizens today are not coercible by fear of their own death. To change their behavior, we need to understand them; and understanding them — what they want, who their local rivals are, how they view themselves relative to the world — is what diplomats do best. It is also true that while special operators remain the ideal type of armed force to succeed in
engaging sub-state threats to the United States abroad, they can only function as needed when supported by other tools of foreign policy; including diplomacy, foreign aid, and development. Moreover, the full range of U.S. foreign policy tools was never designed to solve thorny foreign problems for others, but to assist others in solving their own problems. Left on their own, even well-trained and well-led special operators using discriminate violence against U.S. and allied adversaries can at best only address the symptoms of a threat, not its underlying causes. By refusing to acknowledge that many of our adversaries are rational, human, and aggrieved; and that many of those grievances are both legitimate and within our power to redress, we systematically deprive our special operators of the ability to focus their limited resources on the subset of adversaries who are evil and inhuman; who have illegitimate grievances and grievances which can never be redressed.

In sum, kinetic diplomacy trades violence for engagement, and undermines a local government’s ability to solve its problems on its own. Though often satisfying in the short term (e.g. Osama Bin Laden is dead, killed by U.S. Navy SEALs), it’s a recipe for disaster in the long term (Al Qaeda has metastasized and dispersed, and remains no less dangerous today than it did in 2001). It needs to be tempered now.

CORRECTION: A previous version of this article mistakenly stated that Madeleine Albright was secretary of state during her dispute with Colin Powell, and misstated the year in which the dispute occurred. The article also mistakenly stated that L. Paul Bremer III did not have diplomatic experience when he was appointed to oversee Iraq’s reconstruction. These errors have been corrected.
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Image: U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jorden M. Weir