

NEW VOICES IN

GRAND STRATEGY

MICHAEL J. ZAK LECTURE SERIES

Foreword by Richard Fontaine and Loren DeJonge Schulman

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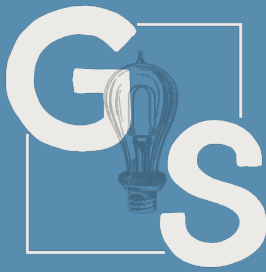
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About the Michael J. Zak Grand Strategy Lecture

In March 2018, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) launched the Michael J. Zak Grand Strategy Lecture Series, a new annual event developed to feature original thinking on American grand strategy. For the 2019 event, CNAS commissioned seven essays on American grand strategy unbound by the intellectual and strategic strictures of the past. In *New Voices in Grand Strategy*, CNAS brings together strategists, academics, and policymakers to offer a vision for a grand strategy that defines national power and purpose on the world stage.

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FOREWORD

RICHARD FONTAINE AND
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In June 2008, the Center for a New American Security published a compendium of essays to grapple with the central questions of American grand strategy.¹ The volume compiled the views of leading senior strategists from across the political spectrum and from both academia and the policy community. Four years later, CNAS embarked on a similar venture, presenting the views of four more expert thinkers.²

Today, the debate over America's proper role in the world is perhaps wider than at any time in decades. The 2016 presidential election illuminated deep divides in the American public about the scope of the country's interests, the nature of existing threats, the financial and military burdens the United States should shoulder, the degree to which values as well as interests should motivate national action, and the methods for attaining national objectives, however defined. The debate among national security experts on such matters should be just as wide and searching.

With the very vision for U.S. global leadership up for grabs, CNAS now seeks to broaden the existing debate by bringing new voices to the conversation. We have commissioned a series of essays on American grand strategy from a new generation of thinkers, strategists, academics, and policymakers. As will immediately become apparent, their contributions are not bound by the intellectual and strategic strictures of the past. Our goal was to question the assumptions and decisions that have guided U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, to assess how ongoing changes in the world should reshape U.S. grand strategy, and ultimately to propose recommendations and alternatives for the way forward. The essays in this volume are fresh, rigorously analytical, and provocative – deliberately so.

They also elucidate and deepen the range of grand-strategic options, identifying different and distinct approaches. These seven distinct, thoughtful contributions from rising leaders in the field serve as starting points for policymakers seeking to define America's role in a changing world. We hope that they will also serve as a resource for all those wishing to thoughtfully consider the right grand strategy for the United States today.

1. "Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy," edited by Michele A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, Center for a New American Security, June 2008, https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/FlournoyBrimley_Finding-Our-Way_June08.pdf?mtime=20160906082323.
2. "America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration," edited by Richard Fontaine and Kristin Lord, Center for a New American Security, May 2012, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/americas-path-grand-strategy-for-the-next-administration>.

**POWER AND PRAGMATISM:
REFORMING AMERICAN FOREIGN
POLICY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

EMMA ASHFORD

Humility is a virtue. Yet in the last quarter century, American policymakers have been far more likely to embrace the notion of America as the “indispensable nation,” responsible for protecting allies, promoting democracy and human rights, tamping down conflicts, and generally managing global affairs. Compare this ideal to the U.S. track record – endless Middle Eastern wars, the rise of ISIS, global democratic backsliding, a revanchist Russia, resurgent China, and a world reeling from the election of President Donald Trump – and this label seems instead the height of hubris.

Many of the failures of U.S. foreign policy speak for themselves. As the daily drumbeat of bad news attests, interventions in Iraq and Libya were not victories for human rights or democracy, but rather massively destabilizing for the Middle East as a whole. Afghanistan – despite initial military successes – has become a quagmire, highlighting the futility of nation-building.

Other failures of America’s grand strategy are less visible, but no less damaging. NATO expansion into Eastern Europe helped to reignite hostility between Russia and the West. Worse, it has diluted the alliance’s defensive capacity and its democratic character. And even as the war on terror fades from public view, it remains as open-ended as ever: Today, the United States is at war in seven countries and engaged in “combating terrorism” in more than 80.¹

To put it bluntly: America’s strategy since the end of the Cold War – whether it is called primacy or liberal internationalism – may not be a total failure, but it has not been successful either. Many have tried to place blame for these poor outcomes.² But recrimination is less important than understanding why America’s strategy has failed so badly and avoiding these mistakes in future.

Much of the explanation is the natural outcome of changing constraints. Iraq and Libya should not be viewed as regrettable anomalies, but rather the logical outcome of unipolarity and America’s liberal internationalist inclination to solve every global problem. It’s also a reliance on flawed assumptions – that what is good for America is always good for the world, for example. Support for dangerous sovereignty-undermining norms adds to the problem; just look at the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which has proved not to protect populations or stabilize fragile states, but to provoke chaos, encourage nuclear proliferation, and undermine the international institutions.

Perhaps, if nothing else had changed, a form of watered-down liberal internationalism that foreswore interventionism and drew back from the war on terror might have been possible.³ But international politics are undergoing a period of profound transformation, from unipolarity to regional or even global multipolarity. Primacy – and the consistent drumbeat of calls in Washington to do more, always and everywhere – is neither sustainable nor prudent. Nor can we fall back on warmed-over Cold War-era strategies better suited to an era of bipolar superpower competition.

It is worrying, then, that perhaps the most important driving force in U.S. foreign policy today is inertia. Path dependence locks America into alliances and security commitments with unreliable partners, strategically unwise military conflicts, and policies better designed for the unipolar or Cold War eras. The challenge – and most

Recrimination is less important than understanding why America’s strategy has failed so badly and avoiding these mistakes in future.

important task – for any new grand strategy is to make a strategic caesura: to pause and re-examine America’s foreign policy commitments and force posture, pruning as necessary to reach a more balanced and prudent approach for the 21st century.

What would such a pared-down strategy look like? It would seek to retain useful alliances, while downsizing or exiting partnerships that are costly and outdated. It would maintain a strong military capability, but make far fewer military commitments, relying more frequently on other tools from the foreign policy tool kit. Rather than existing formulations of competition or confrontation, it would focus instead on maintaining American security and managing the transition to a stable, multipolar world without provoking a war – cold or hot – with China.

Undoubtedly, such a strategy would require accepting greater strategic autonomy on the part of allies, with all the pros and cons that that entails. Yet a scaled-down U.S. grand strategy that focuses on mitigating key threats to American security is likely to be more sustainable, more successful and – perhaps most importantly for the 2020 presidential candidates currently seeking a foreign policy vision – more popular in the decades to come than any of the alternatives.

Primacy Unchained

Supporters of American primacy often argue that U.S. grand strategy has changed little since the end of World War II. This framing conveniently allows them to portray primacy not only as a key force in ending the Cold War and ensuring America's ascendance to global superpower, but also as a stabilizing and benign strategy that seeks global – not national – welfare. It is also closely tied to the concept of the so-called liberal international order, the idea that the American-led order during and after the Cold War was liberal, multilateral, and rules-based.

Both notions, of course, are fundamentally misleading. As various scholars have noted, the idea of a “liberal international order” is fundamentally ahistorical; insofar as liberal and open features of the international system exist, they are more the result of American power than any institution or rules-based system. These features were themselves often the result of fundamentally *illiberal* choices by the United States or its allies: backing autocratic allies, fomenting coups in Soviet-aligned states, and supporting rebels in wars from Afghanistan to Nicaragua.⁴ The notion of a liberal international order is also Eurocentric: Outside the European continent, the United States' Cold War-era policies were far more often coercive and reliant on autocratic allies.

The second notion – that America's strategy has remained unchanged since 1945 – is also misleading. Certainly, it is true that the principles underlying America's approach to the world are largely unchanged. In both the Cold War era and afterwards, American policymakers sought to build strong alliances, shape multilateral institutions in ways that would buttress American power, and prevent other states from threatening U.S. primacy. Yet the world itself has changed. The American strategy of building strong military alliance structures – particularly in Europe and Asia – made sense when faced with a peer-competitor Soviet Union. It makes almost no sense today. Nor does the robust American military presence in the Middle East, or alliances with problematic autocrats.

More importantly, primacy is now free of the constraints placed upon it by the exigencies of a bipolar international system. For U.S. policymakers, this has allowed for a massive expansion of goals. For the Clinton administration, a series of decisions – to pursue dual containment in the Middle East, the expansion of NATO, the interventions in Kosovo and Haiti – dramatically expanded the scope of U.S. global ambitions

to include global policing and humanitarian functions. By the Bush administration, the remit of U.S. foreign policy was nothing less than “the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”⁵

America's grand strategy, consequentially, is today much more ambitious and assertive than it used to be: Primacy is unchained.

So if, as John Lewis Gaddis defines it, “grand strategy is the calculated relationship of means to large ends,” then it is the ends that have dramatically increased in size since 1991, even as means and motives remain similar. America's grand strategy, consequentially, is today much more ambitious and assertive than it used to be: Primacy is unchained.

Brave New World

To adjudicate the success or failure of today's grand strategy, we therefore need to look at the post-Cold War period. The goals set by proponents of liberal internationalism during this period were clearly expansive. Maintaining primacy – military and economic – was in many ways the least important.⁶ Indeed, as Richard Haass put it, America's purpose was “not to resist multipolarity . . . but to define it,” creating a world with few wars, no proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, an open economic system, and an obligation to humanitarian intervention where necessary.⁷

By the standards of its defenders, therefore, America's current grand strategy has clearly been a failure. The world has not been reshaped.⁸ Yet even by more modest standards, it has largely failed. Stephen Walt argues that “both the overall condition of the world and America's status within it had declined steadily and significantly between 1993 and 2016 Great power competition had returned with a vengeance, weapons of mass destruction continued to spread, terrorists and other violent extremists were an active force in more places, [and] the Middle East was in turmoil.”⁹ To put it another way, America entered the 1990s with perhaps the greatest peace dividend ever seen. Today, it limps towards 2020 in a disordered world with many of those benefits squandered.

American grand strategy cannot be blamed for all of these developments. The rise of China and the slide toward a multipolar world were both inevitable and

widely predicted two decades ago. But primacy has worsened many of these trends, or, as in the case of great-power competition, hastened their arrival. Central to understanding the failures of America's current grand strategy are three contemporary problems.

The Intervention Trap

Military intervention abroad is not a bug, but rather a feature of American primacy. Certainly, some would argue that disasters like the Iraq war are a momentary aberration in a broader pattern of benevolent foreign policy behavior. Yet supporters of primacy are often schizophrenic about this issue. Hal Brands, for example, has argued both that democracy promotion is a core liberal project, and that the norms of nonaggression and sovereignty are paramount to the U.S.-led order.¹⁰ Others describe humanitarian or pro-democracy intervention as a necessary – even core – component of maintaining international order.¹¹

In reality, the broad, sweeping goals of liberal internationalism almost inevitably lead to intervention, at least in an era of unipolarity. The rationale may vary from case to case, but illiberal behavior – military conquest – typically is excused as justifiable in the service of liberal goals,¹² from nonproliferation in Iraq, to human rights

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in Libya or Kosovo, to counterterrorism in Niger and Cameroon. Since the end of the Cold War and the end of bipolarity, such interventions have become substantially more numerous; by one estimate, the United States engaged in four times as many military interventions since 1992 as during the whole of the Cold War.¹³ American endorsement of problematic norms like the Responsibility to Protect have only added to the problem.

The results of the intervention trap have been dire. The few moderate successes have been largely outweighed by an impressive number of failures. The war in Iraq upset the balance of power in the Middle East and helped to contribute to the rise of ISIS. The U.S.-installed government of Afghanistan continues to slowly lose ground against a resurgent Taliban. The intervention in Libya produced an ongoing civil conflict. And American actions in these cases may be driving dictators elsewhere – like North Korea's Kim Jong Un – to pursue the protection that only nuclear weapons can bring.

Even interventions like Kosovo, typically viewed as more benign, can be problematic. As James Goldgeier

notes, “Because it ended with NATO victorious and Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic irreversibly weakened, it does not get the same level of attention as the 2003 Iraq War or the 2011 intervention in Libya. But it should.”¹⁴ Confrontations with both Russia and China during the Kosovo intervention helped to worsen relations, and the intervention itself later served as a precedent for the Bush administration's unilateral invasion of Iraq.

On a broader level, the exponential growth of U.S. counterterrorism commitments overseas – from drone strikes to special ops forces and the deployment of troops to engage in “train-and-equip” missions – has driven groups with predominantly local grievances into the arms of global terror groups, and has increased radicalization in various areas.¹⁵ Counterterrorism missions are frequently invisible to the American people, and policymakers rarely debate their missions or cost, continuing to rely on the dated 2001 Authorization to use Military Force. Constant interventions squander blood and treasure, all while chipping away at U.S. military readiness.¹⁶

As Michael Spirtas of Rand describes, “Almost two decades of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq have resulted in a generation of American service members with little experience in thinking about or preparing for major power conflict.”¹⁷ These outcomes are not the consequence of a few poor decisions, but rather of the core motivating concepts of primacy and its expansive aims. If we continue to adhere to a strategy that views America as the world's policeman and savior, we will remain stuck in the intervention trap.

Hubris

America's liberal internationalist strategy has long been characterized by a form of hubris; the idea that America can fix most global problems and achieve any goal it sets itself to. Indeed, foreign policy elites too often cling to the inaccurate idea that American “credibility” is on the line in even the most trivial of international crises.¹⁸ Perhaps this shouldn't be viewed as strange; after all, this approach to American foreign policy largely emerged in the mid-1990s, when American military, economic, and soft power were effectively unrivaled.¹⁹ Yet as the United States enters a period of relative decline, it will become more problematic.²⁰

Even today, proponents of primacy tend to share an overconfidence about the fungibility of U.S. power: In effect, they assume that it is easy to transform America's outsize economic and military advantages into actual

foreign policy achievements. The U.S. track record, however, suggests that is not the case. The result is disturbing: Primacy as a strategy is increasingly detached from global realities.

Take America's overwhelming military might, which nonetheless has proven inadequate to the task of counter-insurgency campaigns and nation-building in the Middle East. Attempts to arm and fund moderate rebels inside Syria to overthrow the Assad regime likewise foundered amid the realities of a brutal, multi-sided civil war, and confusing, contradictory policy dictates from Washington.

Primacy as a strategy is increasingly detached from global realities.

This is not the fault of the U.S. military. When asked to prosecute a war with limited objectives – such as the swift overthrow of Saddam Hussein – it has been an effective and powerful hammer. When pointed at a problem – like development or nation-building – that turned out not to be a nail, it understandably has not done so well.

Nor is this hubris limited to military force. The development of complex financial sanctions has provided lawmakers with a critical non-military pressure tool. America's centrality in the U.S. financial system can be used to deny countries or terror groups key resources, or to achieve moderate policy concessions. Instead, policymakers have pursued endless sanctions as a tool of coercion, trying to effect major policy changes through limited financial means in literally hundreds of cases, with little understanding of cost or impact.

Needless to say, in cases from Russia to Syria to Sudan, sanctions have never achieved these maximalist goals. This all-out strategy has been taken to its logical conclusion by the Trump administration, which has turned sanctions on even close U.S. allies who do not agree with American goals. The resulting creation of sanctions circumvention mechanisms like the European Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) – designed to avoid U.S. secondary sanctions following its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – ultimately threatens America's ability to use sanctions at all.

Like intervention, this sense of hubris is a logical result of how primacy views the role of the United States. The goal is no less than to reshape the world. And if America takes on the mantle of global leadership, and if it is doing so for benign reasons, the natural conclusion is that other countries should fall in line with U.S. demands, and should view U.S. goals favorably.

The issue of NATO expansion is perhaps the quintessential example of this thinking. Whatever ultimately motivated the American choice to expand NATO, it was viewed in Moscow as a malign encroachment into territory that had long been within the Russian sphere of influence; as such, it was viewed as a genuine security concern by Russian elites, whose concerns were largely brushed aside by American policymakers. And the belief that Russia could do little to prevent NATO expansion also underestimated the ability of Russia to act as a spoiler. The result has been resurgent U.S.-Russian tensions, and a growing willingness by Russian leaders to challenge the United States.

In short, primacy too often overestimates America's capability to alter outcomes and dismisses the agency and capabilities of other states. The result is U.S. policy that is increasingly distant from global realities.

Changing World, Static Strategy

So far, we have largely focused on the historical failures of primacy. Yet perhaps the biggest problem is primacy's unsuitability to face the challenges of the future. The global balance of power is changing, as other countries rise and the United States enters a period of relative decline. Though we cannot know what this will look like, the most likely scenario is a Chinese rise that falls short of a Cold War–style bipolar system. Instead, the 21st century will be multipolar, whether that multipolarity is regional – with the United States remaining predominant outside of certain regions – or global.

The bottom line, however, is simple: The alliance structures and force posture adopted by the United States during the Cold War or unipolarity are not well suited to compete in this new world.

For starters, America's network of allies and partners is costly and moribund. NATO may carry historical and sentimental weight on both sides of the Atlantic, but expansion and an increasing focus on expeditionary warfare has weakened its ability to act as a coherent collective defense organization and diluted its Western, democratic nature.²¹ Strategically, NATO is problematic. Certainly, the United States maintains an interest in defending the industrial centers of Western Europe. But there are no real threats to Western Europe. Russia is too weak to challenge rich Western European states, China too far away, and internal problems are far more pressing for most Western European states.

In contrast, those states with actual security threats – the small Eastern European or Baltic states – are largely disconnected from American interests. The contributions of NATO members to America's Middle East wars

have been laudatory, but never militarily critical. And their membership in NATO carries costs for U.S. security, notably raising tensions with Russia and creating entanglement risks for U.S. forces in the region.

The list of “challenges” and goals for U.S. foreign policy continues to grow every year. Yet there is little reprioritization or reconsideration of existing commitments, and no willingness to make needed tradeoffs.

Also costly is NATO’s role in weakening the defense capabilities of countries that should be America’s strongest partners. Again, this is a feature, not a bug of primacy: U.S. defense dominance discourages allies from investing in their own defense. But while this policy made sense in the aftermath of World War II – potentially preventing conflict in Europe – it makes almost no sense today. Indeed, America would undoubtedly be better served by a world in which European states could bolster U.S. defensive capabilities with their own substantial resources. So long as Germany, France, and Britain are incentivized to spend on social programs rather than defense, this cannot happen.

In the Middle East, America’s long-running relationship with Saudi Arabia increasingly serves only Saudi interests. U.S. security would be best served by a relative balance of power in the Gulf, with neither Saudis nor Iranians dominant. The Saudi partnership prevents that. It also disincentivizes regional states from overcoming their political differences in the name of greater security. And it has emboldened a reckless Saudi foreign policy that has helped to destabilize the region more broadly. Our continued partnership with Saudi Arabia cannot be justified by any reasonable standard.

America’s formal partnerships in East Asia – notably Japan and South Korea – are more strategically justifiable in light of the rise of China. But the way these alliances are structured is profoundly unhelpful. In both cases, the United States maintains large deployments of troops, and routinely takes the lead on all military matters. This is the case even in instances – from Okinawa to South Korean command-and-control – where these countries would prefer to manage matters themselves. By requiring control rather than cooperation from our partners, American alliance policy disincentivizes countries from working to improve their own security, all while increasing tensions between the United States and China.

More broadly, one of primacy’s biggest problems is its focus on persistent alliances. Too often, protecting allies and perpetuating alliances are described by policymakers as core U.S. national security interests.²² But maintaining existing alliances simply because they already exist – without considering changes in the international system and how they impact U.S. security – is strategic malpractice.

The alliance question is also emblematic of a broader problem in U.S. grand strategy: that inertia has become the key driver of U.S. foreign policy.

Path dependence drives America’s continued commitment to losing conflicts like Afghanistan. It encourages us to maintain a war on terror through an ever-increasing series of global deployments against an increasingly marginal set of extremist groups, most of whom pose no direct threat to the United States. Bases are maintained in places like Kuwait or Germany, where the security risks to allies dried up some years ago. Path dependence means that such bases may serve new purposes – such as the role of German bases as forward hospitals – but they are not closed or moved.

Even the Trump administration – for all its talk of changing U.S. foreign policy – has in practice simply expanded the list of things America must do around the world. The 2017 National Security Strategy added “strategic competition” with Russia and China to the list of national strategic priorities; it did not compensate by reducing any existing military or foreign policy commitments.²³

Primacy has proved itself largely unable to change in an era of changing global politics. Foreign policy elites undoubtedly recognize that the world is changing: The list of “challenges” and goals for U.S. foreign policy continues to grow every year. Yet there is little reprioritization or reconsideration of existing commitments, and no willingness to make needed tradeoffs. As a grand strategy – the “art of reconciling ends and means”²⁴ in a changing world – primacy falls woefully short.

Pragmatism and Power

Let’s be clear: America’s grand strategy has not actually changed in recent years. No matter what critics say,²⁵ the Obama administration did not retrench globally or adopt a realist foreign policy. Nor has the Trump administration. Though President Barack Obama did authorize some troop drawdowns, he added new wars in Libya and new deployments across Africa. Even those drawdowns

are only a reduction when compared to the height of the Bush administration's wars. If you instead take your baseline as the late Cold War era or even the mid-1990s, it's clear that American military involvement overseas remains extraordinarily high in historical terms.

Yet the Obama administration's experiences in attempting to minimally downsize U.S. Middle East commitments offer a few salutary lessons for those who would seek to implement a more pragmatic and restrained grand strategy. It is politically risky: Even small decreases in America's overseas commitments risk being blamed when something bad inevitably happens. Indeed, changing America's grand strategy may resemble critical economic policy changes that often follow a J-shaped curve: Things get worse before they get better, making change unappealing to policymakers. Not changing to reflect a shifting world, however, would be riskier in the long run.

What would a more prudent grand strategy look like? In many ways, the bones of such a strategy flow naturally from the problems with today's strategy. America has become overextended and addicted to excessive military intervention; a new approach would curtail and dramatically reduce intervention abroad. There are two parts to this: reducing American commitments to current interventions – the careful withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, accompanied by across-the-board cuts in other counterterrorism missions – and raising the bar required for any future intervention. New interventions should be extremely rare. They should only occur when a key American – not allied – national security interest is at stake, and when there is no other willing or able party that can achieve the goal.

Likewise, if America's network of alliances and security partnerships around the world has stagnated, it must be reformed and reshaped to serve today's needs. This will look different in different places. In some cases, such as U.S. Middle East partnerships, severing a military relationship is simple and carries few costs. America's direct support for Saudi military campaigns is strategically counterproductive and in the realm of human rights. And there is little need for substantial military bases – with the possible exception of naval headquarters in Manama – in the Middle East in the absence of major military campaigns in the region. Dialing down these conflicts would allow America to close large bases in Kuwait, Qatar, and Turkey, and draw back from Saudi Arabia, giving the United States a freer hand in challenging these countries' human rights abuses.

In East Asia, the rise of China suggests that the United States must find ways to continue working with Japan

and South Korea. But these relationships are today massively unbalanced. On the Korean Peninsula, a diplomatic push to finally end the Korean conflict and improve relations between North and South also would allow for the gradual removal of U.S. forces. In both Japan and South Korea, the gradual removal of troops will help to reduce tensions with China, minimize the risk that personnel become involved in ongoing territorial disputes, and shift the burden of defense into the hands of these states for the long term.

America has become overextended and addicted to excessive military intervention; a new approach would curtail and dramatically reduce intervention abroad.

The most complex, of course, is America's long-running commitment to NATO. The United States should not withdraw from the alliance. But it should make steady progress over the next decade to ending the U.S. military footprint in Europe and gradually shifting the burden of defense to major European states. Policymakers also should seriously consider unorthodox and novel ways to reform the alliance to reduce entanglement risk, whether that is consolidating NATO back to smaller membership, developing mechanisms to expel difficult member-states, or encouraging the creation of parallel, complementary, or alternative collective defense arrangements among groups of European states.²⁶ Such changes carry costs – allies may not always share American views about how best to achieve security – but they are small compared to the risks of continuing with the status quo.

The most important component of a new grand strategy is a willingness to limit America's goals and use commensurate means to achieve them. Ultimately, grand strategy is "a theory of how a state can cause security for itself."²⁷ America's strategic aims should be limited to those that actually impact U.S. security. This means largely abandoning humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion. It requires an acceptance that alliances are not ends in themselves. And it necessitates self-control based on understanding that America cannot singlehandedly reshape the world; instead, it must react to the world as it is.

Avoiding threat inflation is key. Terrorism, cyberattacks, and nuclear proliferation are all real problems. But the threat they pose to Americans is limited; the response

to them should be proportionate. Policymakers also should be conscious that the military is not the only tool of foreign policy. Diplomacy, limited use of sanctions and other economic statecraft, intelligence, trade, immigration, and even the soft power of cultural exchange are all useful tools for achieving U.S. interests.

The most difficult problem for U.S. grand strategy in coming years will be China. The belief of liberal internationalists that China's integration into international markets and institutions would reduce the likelihood of future great-power competition has proven false. Yet – with the exception of a few questionable maritime claims – there also is little evidence that China is a revisionist power seeking to dominate Asia or the world, and there are strong concerns that a strategy of confrontation with China is likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A balanced approach – seeking to allay Chinese fears while protecting America's advantages in international institutions and access to sea lanes and global trade – is needed. It will be extremely challenging to execute.

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Ultimately, however, the key goal of U.S. grand strategy for the next few decades is to ensure a soft landing into the multipolar world, avoiding a cold or hot conflict with China. For this reason, it is vital to conserve American resources and share the burden with like-minded states where ever possible. This is distinct from today's policy of alliances as an end in themselves; instead, it is seeking like-minded states in Europe and Asia who share a common vision of global security and are willing to commit concrete resources to it. Meanwhile, policymakers must not only limit America's global aims, but be realistic about what U.S. power can actually achieve in the world.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Reinhold Niebuhr, closely associated with the development of realist foreign policy in the mid-20th century, also is credited as the author of the Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."²⁸ If America's grand strategy is to be successful in the 21 century, we could do worse than adopt this kind of pragmatism and modesty.

**POWER AND PRAGMATISM:
REFORMING AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

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**GRAND STRATEGY FOR A NEW
TWILIGHT STRUGGLE**

HAL BRANDS

The Cold War was more normal than we often think. There were distinctive aspects of that rivalry, particularly its global nature and the threat of nuclear Armageddon. But at its core, the Cold War was just one of a long line of great-power struggles to set the terms of world order. Those struggles date back to antiquity. They often have featured smoldering rivalry punctuated by the threat or occurrence of war. And they typically have blended geopolitical and ideological conflict, involving the balance of ideas no less than the balance of power. George Marshall said that one could not “think with full wisdom and with deep convictions” about the Cold War without understanding the Athens-Sparta rivalry.¹ Similarly, veterans of that ancient struggle would have had no difficulty understanding the Cold War – or the world we inhabit today.

Thirty years after the Cold War ended, the world is fracturing and America’s principal grand strategic challenge is once again high-stakes, long-term competition against formidable revisionist states – China and Russia. So far, this competition is occurring mainly in the no-man’s land between peace and war, although the danger of military conflict is growing. It is an intense geopolitical struggle over power and influence, but it also is an inescapably ideological conflict between opposing models of government and differing visions of international society. The outcome of this competition will determine whether the 21st century becomes an extension of the relatively peaceful, prosperous, and stable world to which Americans have become accustomed – or marks a return to the predatory, coercive patterns of a more distant past. It also will influence the fate of freedom in countries around the globe. If this does not constitute a “new Cold War,” it will do until one comes along.²

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The United States, with its phalanx of allies and partners, has the power to wage this contest effectively. But doing so will require U.S. grand strategy to become less ambitious and more assertive. Less ambitious in that

America will not be able to achieve the post-Cold War dream of a truly global order in which liberal values are universal and revisionist powers have become responsible stakeholders. Yet more assertive in that America and its friends will have to compete with greater vigor, on a larger number of fronts, over a generational time frame if they are to defend the extraordinary achievements of the past 70 years and prevent the onset of a darker age. In the late 1940s, one policymaker described America’s grand strategy as “holding our own world together” while “increasing the disruptive strains” on the enemy’s world.³ That’s the basic task in today’s twilight struggle as well.⁴

The Success and Failure of Post-Cold War Grand Strategy

The triumph of the West over the Soviet bloc during the Cold War represented a momentous twofold achievement: the containment of a dangerous adversary and the building of a vibrant free-world community under American leadership. After the Cold War, Washington doubled down on this success.

Multiple administrations promoted democracy and free markets while seeking to suppress threats from rogue states, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. America also blended deterrence, in the form of a global alliance network and unmatched military capabilities, with integration, in the form of membership in a thriving global economy, in a bid to dissuade potential challengers from upsetting the status quo. The near-term goal was to preserve U.S. primacy while expanding the “liberal international order.” The longer-run objective was to globalize that order by co-opting – and eventually transforming – the major countries that might try to disrupt it. “Our idea,” Secretary of State James Baker explained in 1992, “is to replace the dangerous period of the Cold War with a democratic peace” covering “the whole world.”⁵

This grand strategy helped make the post-Cold War world remarkably democratic and prosperous. It smothered resurgent instability in Eastern Europe and East Asia and fostered an environment in which America and its allies were utterly dominant. U.S. statecraft thereby delayed the return of a more competitive world for 20 years, far longer than most scholars had thought possible.⁶ Unfortunately, the grandest aspirations of this strategy – that the liberal order could become universal and great-power rivalry could be relegated to the past – went wanting, for three reasons.

The first was a failure of integration. U.S. officials hoped that China and Russia would become responsible

stakeholders in an American-led world. Once prospects for democratization in these countries faded, however, it was certain that authoritarian regimes predicated on the suppression of liberalism would feel threatened in a world where liberal values were supreme.⁷ Similarly, Washington was not wrong to expand NATO, maintain its alliances in East Asia, and prevent China and Russia from controlling their “near abroads.” But Moscow and Beijing resented – more deeply than U.S. officials understood – the fact that a hegemonic America stood athwart their geopolitical ambitions.

That resentment might not have mattered if not for the second reason – the shifting power balance. So long as U.S. primacy was unrivaled, even dissatisfied powers could not risk incurring America’s “focused enmity.”⁸ Yet U.S. primacy became more contested over time, in part due to the prosperity the liberal order fostered. Russia’s constant-dollar GDP doubled between 1998 and 2014, and its military spending quadrupled. Between 1990 and 2016, Chinese GDP increased roughly twelve-fold and military spending grew tenfold.⁹ Countries that desired to challenge the American order were now increasingly capable of doing so.

This shift was exacerbated by a third factor: distraction, disinvestment, and creeping disinterest by the United States. After 2001, America spent a decade focusing its military and diplomatic engagement on the Middle East rather than on maintaining a generational lead over potential peer-competitors. For a half-decade after that, Washington slashed defense spending due to fiscal pressures and political dysfunction. And since the 2008 financial crisis, U.S. officials have shown ambivalence about American leadership, subtly under Barack Obama and flagrantly under Donald Trump. The constraints, both material and psychological, on revisionist behavior were weakening as the impetus to such behavior intensified. Over the past decade, China and Russia have mounted a challenge that is ambitious indeed.

The Authoritarian Challenge

Consider the geopolitical challenge. Through various tactics – from geo-economic projects to military intimidation – both China and Russia are seeking to reestablish spheres of influence and bring their strategic peripheries to heel. They are contesting international norms such as freedom of navigation and non-aggression, and undermining U.S. alliances and partnerships from the Baltic to the South China Sea. Both countries have executed major military buildups to cow

their neighbors and hold U.S. forces at risk, and both have sought to project influence not just regionally but globally. This is “normal” behavior by dissatisfied powers. Yet it is troubling because it is eroding the geopolitical pillars – the relationships, norms, and configurations of power – of a world that has been so advantageous to U.S. interests, and because it is reviving the more predatory proclivities American statecraft has aimed to suppress. The Chinese challenge in particular could eventually pose a severe threat to the global balance of power and the dominance of the democracies.¹⁰

The geopolitical challenge is intimately related to the ideological challenge. China and Russia are intensifying and modernizing repression at home while supporting fellow autocrats and exporting tools of political control abroad. They are subverting and intimidating democracies in their respective neighborhoods and meddling in democratic processes across multiple continents. They are working assiduously to corrupt international norms regarding human rights, to establish pro-author-

China and Russia are not merely nibbling away at the edges of the international system. They are reaching into the heart of the democratic world.

itarian global rules for Internet management, and to hold up their own autocratic systems as models for other countries to follow. In doing so, Beijing and Moscow are seeking to end the global ascendancy of democratic values and make the 21st century an age of authoritarian revival. The more prevalent illiberal forms of governance are, the more secure autocratic rulers in Russia and China will be. And the stronger those countries become, the better they can shape the balance of ideas as well as the balance of power.¹¹

Indeed, China and Russia are not merely nibbling away at the edges of the international system. They are reaching into the heart of the democratic world. Part of China’s ongoing effort to seize the economic and technological high ground has been a systematic campaign to weaken the United States by using intellectual property theft, forced technology transfer, and mercantilist trade practices. Beijing also has exerted its economic and diplomatic leverage to stifle foreign criticism of its human rights abuses, effectively exporting its restrictions on freedom of speech.

Most alarmingly, both China and Russia have employed influence operations – suborning corruption, spreading disinformation, and others – to distort democratic political systems and sow discord within

U.S. rivalries with Russia and China represent two fronts in the same struggle; the strategic symbiosis between Moscow and Beijing is magnifying the disruption the revisionist challenge causes.

opposing coalitions.¹² Here, there is a powerful synergy between strengthening autocracy at home and weakening democracy abroad: The tools Putin used to interfere in America’s 2016 elections were the same tools he initially developed to bolster his domestic authority. In the future, the rise of deepfakes, synthetic media, and other fruits of artificial intelligence will give China and Russia still greater ability to poison democratic political systems, as intensifying competition gives them still greater incentive to do so. The more fragmented and demoralized the “free world” is, the easier it will be for the authoritarian powers to achieve their objectives. The democratic decay and surging illiberalism in key parts of the world – including Europe and America – offer fertile ground for this sort of political warfare.

To be clear, neither China nor Russia is determined simply to destroy the existing order as Napoleon or Hitler did. Both countries – China especially – need a functioning global economy to maintain domestic prosperity. Yet both countries nonetheless are seeking, in parallel ways and for parallel reasons, a dramatically altered international environment – one in which spheres of economic and geopolitical influence have returned, American power is balanced and constrained, and authoritarianism advances as democracy retreats.¹³ These visions are antithetical to America’s interest in preserving a world where the United States can trade freely, influence events in key regions, and prevent aggressive authoritarian regimes and ideologies from gaining the global ascendancy – and they can succeed only if the U.S.-led liberal order is rolled back and weakened. And because Russia and China share this objective, they have forged an increasingly strong strategic partnership, tightened cooperation with other autocracies such as Iran, and thereby constituted a sort of authoritarian international for the 21st century.

This last point is crucial. There are myriad historical tensions and policy differences between Russia and China. But the overarching geopolitical and ideological congruence of their aims is profound, and it has

produced the closest bilateral alignment in decades. Even where Russia and China are not explicitly working together – in supporting beleaguered authoritarian regimes, for instance – their actions have mutually reinforcing effects.¹⁴ U.S. rivalries with Russia and China

thus represent two fronts in the same struggle; the strategic symbiosis between Moscow and Beijing is magnifying the disruption the revisionist challenge causes.

So far, admittedly, that disruption has remained less severe than it might be. Moscow has avoided attacking U.S. allies militarily, even as it has dismembered Ukraine and Georgia and waged “war by other means” against the West. Beijing has pursued its aims largely through measures short of outright conflict. Yet China and Russia could become more confrontational if they perceive that a sharper challenge might be successful. That moment of danger is closer than most Americans realize. Shifting regional military balances have created situations in which Chinese leaders might believe they could win a short, limited war against the United States over Taiwan, or Russian leaders might think they could conduct a smash-and-grab in the Baltic and use the threat of nuclear escalation to deter NATO.¹⁵ It would hardly be unprecedented for a revisionist power to use force in hopes of shattering the authority and credibility of an established power.

Of course, whether Beijing and Moscow can achieve their ambitions – by force or otherwise – remains uncertain. Both countries face serious economic, political, and demographic problems; both have provoked resistance among their neighbors. Yet Russia has so far compensated for its limited power with risk-taking and asymmetric competition that has caught rivals flat-footed. And even if Chinese power eventually falters, between now and then Beijing could still be the most formidable international opponent America has ever faced. Meanwhile, the malaise and divisions within the democratic world give Russia and China reason to hope that time is on their side.

The authoritarian challenge will not disappear anytime soon. How America should respond is the defining question of our time.

Wrong Answers

One approach, suggested by prominent U.S. and international observers, would emphasize conciliation over confrontation. If it is normal for major powers to seek greater sway, especially on their strategic peripheries, perhaps America should partially accommodate those desires. By conceding Russia and China additional influence – if not total dominance – over their geographical neighborhoods, Washington might ease those countries’ perceptions of insecurity and defuse their dissatisfaction with the broader international system. At the very least, such withdrawals could be traded for reciprocal concessions. A U.S. decision to abandon Taiwan might be exchanged for limits on Chinese claims and coercion in the South China Sea.¹⁶

The trouble, however, is that this approach makes great concessions – moral and strategic – up front and runs terrible risks down the road. In the near term, this strategy would leave democratic states such as Taiwan, Ukraine, and Georgia in the geopolitical clutches of brutal autocracies. Over the longer term, it would give Russia and China enhanced strategic positions by reducing the challenges they face on their frontiers. Put simply, a China that had reincorporated Taiwan, or a Russia that effectively controlled Ukraine, would be better positioned to push for even greater advantage within its region and beyond. And if such deals fail to satiate Russian and Chinese ambitions – if they simply convince Moscow and Beijing that the U.S.-led order is fragmenting – the result could be more, not less, instability.

A second idea – reducing the threat by splitting America’s chief adversaries – is also unrealistic. Ideally, Washington would not have to confront two rivals simultaneously: It might use Russia to contain China, just as it once used China against the Soviet Union. Yet Moscow is presently the more aggressive of the two powers; it is driven by a deep geopolitical and ideological animus toward America and the democratic world. It is hard to imagine Putin reversing course and confronting China absent some exorbitant Western payoff that would severely weaken the international system in the name of saving it. This might change in the future. If China makes a serious run at global primacy, Russia may not like having an aggressive behemoth on its borders. But in the near term, there is little Washington can do – at tolerable cost – to flip the unfavorable geometry of the strategic triangle.

Finally, if grand strategies that preemptively give ground are likely to fail, so is a grand strategy that

reverts to the “one-world” internationalism America practiced after the Cold War. The Trump administration has gotten a lot wrong on foreign policy, but what it has gotten right is that America cannot effectively compete *against* China while pursuing ever-deeper economic integration *with* China. More broadly, if post-Cold War strategy sought to draw potential challengers into an expanding liberal order, this objective now seems ever more elusive. A global democratic peace remains a most desirable destination. But America cannot get there anytime soon.

A Grand Strategy of Preservation

What remains is a grand strategy not of retrenchment or expansion but preservation: an approach that aims not to globalize the liberal order, but to preserve that order, impressive but incomplete as it is, against the authoritarian challenge. This grand strategy moderates the ambition of America’s global engagement, seeking to hold the line until Chinese and Russian policies mellow or the nature of these governments changes. Yet given the severity of the authoritarian challenge, it entails significantly intensified measures to resist Russian and Chinese pressures, as well as focused counter-presures against those competitors. This grand strategy is not a replay of Cold War-era containment, because the circumstances and players are different. But it revives the strategic ethos of “holding our own world together” and “increasing the disruptive strains” on the opponent’s world – for as long as it takes to succeed.

This strategy also revives another aspect of Cold War statecraft: the idea that America’s “inside game” is very different than its “outside game.” Inside the order – among America’s allies, close partners, and fellow democracies – U.S. policy has a positive-sum logic. It seeks to strengthen Washington’s position by strengthening like-minded nations. Outside the order,

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U.S. policy takes something nearer a zero-sum approach, meant to defeat rivals' strategies, weaken their positions, and increase their costs. These inside and outside games are, in fact, interdependent. Washington can compete most effectively against its adversaries if it has the cooperation of friends that are convinced of the benefits of American leadership.

Does the United States have the power to pursue this grand strategy? The answer is almost certainly yes. As William Wohlforth, Stephen Brooks, and Michael Beckley have shown, the United States still possesses significant and often-underestimated advantages – military, economic, and diplomatic – over any competitor.¹⁷ When America's dozens of treaty allies and close partners are factored in, the U.S.-led coalition accounts for perhaps 70 percent of global GDP and global military spending.¹⁸ U.S. primacy may not be as towering as it once was, but it

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remains formidable, particularly when Washington works with its friends. If America can summon the requisite purpose and wisdom – if it can capitalize on the steps the Trump administration has taken toward sharper competition while liberating itself from that administration's erratic and self-defeating tendencies – it should be able to execute a grand strategy resting on eight pillars.

Rebuilding Situations of Strength. The most alarming geopolitical trend of recent years has been the erosion of America's "situations of strength" – the alliances and military advantages that constrain revisionist behavior and underpin the liberal order.¹⁹ A grand strategy of preservation begins with measures to sustain deterrence and shore up the balance of power.

This will be expensive. The National Defense Strategy Commission estimates that preserving U.S. military advantages and favorable regional equilibriums will require raising real-dollar defense spending by 3 to 5 percent annually for at least five years.²⁰ Nor is money all that counts: Increased spending and intellectual energy must be focused on solving the operational problems created by the Russian and Chinese buildups and dominating the frontier of technological innovation. Rebuilding situations of strength also will require restoring trust with allies that have been alarmed by Washington's recent unreliability and even hostility, while significantly changing how those alliances operate. This is more than a matter of getting

allies to spend more. It involves networking bilateral relationships in the Indo-Pacific, deepening ties with partners (India, Vietnam, Singapore) that are becoming quasi-allies, and adapting alliances to confront cyberattacks, information operations, and political meddling with no less energy than they would confront a military assault.²¹ The key principle in all this is that America will get the most out of its friends by doing more, not less. Threats of abandonment may produce upticks in military outlays, but over the long term, allies and partners will take more risks and behave more to Washington's liking if they feel assured of U.S. commitment.

Resisting Coercion Short of War. Shoring up an order under assault also requires resisting coercion short of war. Such coercion – China's salami-slicing in the South China Sea or Russia's sponsorship of armed proxies – shifts the status quo incrementally; it demoralizes U.S.

allies and partners by demonstrating that Washington cannot protect them from ambiguous aggression.²² Pushing back is inherently difficult, because this behavior often occurs in the seams between various U.S. government entities and places the onus

of escalation on the defender. But the alternative is losing situations of strength on the installment plan.

America has options here: broadening use of economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure, drawing brighter red-lines and clarifying ambiguous commitments to front-line states, employing cybertools to frustrate probes or exact a price from aggressors, intensifying efforts to expose incremental coercion. Some of these options involve preclusion – deterring or thwarting probes – while others involve punishment – imposing costs in response. The United States needs a tool kit featuring both types of measures, and it must not be deterred from using them by a reflexive fear of escalation.²³ The risks of responding more sharply to coercion short of war are real, but so are the risks of letting that coercion succeed and revisionist momentum accumulate.

Aligning Geo-economics with Geopolitics. Geopolitical thinking was never absent from post-Cold War foreign economic policy. The governing assumption, however, was that deeper integration with potential rivals was a good bet because it eventually would tame and transform them. Today, it is not possible or prudent to pursue a Cold War-style strategy aimed at isolating U.S. competitors (especially China). Yet Washington does need a more competitive approach focused on increasing free-world power and cohesion while providing greater autonomy and leverage vis-à-vis challengers.

This approach should entail limiting dangerous dependencies, such as Europe's reliance on Russian energy, America's use of Chinese-made munitions components, or the dependence of countries throughout Eurasia on Chinese trade, investment, and technology. It should include stronger responses to predatory economic behavior, such as punishing companies that practice intellectual property theft. Not least, it should feature trade and investment pacts meant to promote stronger growth *within* the liberal order while leaving rivals sidelined and disadvantaged.²⁴ Given the economic heft of China in particular, all of these initiatives will need broad multilateral support to succeed. This means ending trade disputes with U.S. allies: Washington will not convince the democratic world to lock arms against Moscow and Beijing while it is simultaneously waging economic war against Brussels.

Taking Up the Ideological Challenge. Because the authoritarian challenge is as much ideological as geopolitical, a robust defense of human rights and democracy is critical to sustaining an environment in which America's own liberal polity can flourish. It is also critical to exerting strategic pressure on China and Russia by ensuring that authoritarian governments remain relatively isolated and marginalized.

Since 2003, democracy promotion has been inextricably (if somewhat unfairly) associated with military crusades in the Middle East. Yet America can mount an inspired defense of its values through largely non-coercive measures. Those measures involve working with other democracies to counter authoritarian disinformation and manipulation, resisting autocratic attempts to promote illiberal global norms such as "Internet sovereignty," and supporting home-grown democratic movements in countries around the world. At a time of political backsliding within U.S. alliances, Washington also should reserve its most intimate relationships for truly democratic allies, while taking a more transactional approach to illiberal partners. Finally, America can strengthen the overall community of democracies by promoting greater institutional linkages between its democratic alliance blocs in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, focused on achieving broader collective defense against authoritarian economic coercion or political subversion. Russia and China know that the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism is a struggle for global strategic advantage. U.S. policy should reflect the same idea.²⁵

Waging Political Warfare. China and Russia are waging political warfare against democratic systems, so strengthened defenses are needed. Yet political

warfare is an offense-dominant domain, and it will be difficult for even a relatively status-quo grand strategy to succeed if Washington remains entirely on the defensive. Moreover, the corrupt authoritarian nature of the Chinese and Russian regimes represents perhaps their greatest competitive weakness. A grand strategy of preservation therefore needs an offensive component: a forward-leaning program of political warfare.

Offensive political warfare can involve supporting dissidents, human rights activities, and non-governmental organizations within authoritarian societies; using targeted sanctions to penalize abusive officials; publicizing information about official corruption and repression; continually underscoring the contrast between liberal and illiberal systems of governments; and other projects. The point of these initiatives is not to overthrow the Chinese or Russian regimes (a dangerous and probably unachievable policy). The point is to increase their costs, divert their ambitions and energies, and force rivals that have been on the offensive to play defense for a change.²⁶

Pursuing Realistic Cooperation. Americans must re-acustom themselves to competition as a way of life. Yet they also should remember that cooperation can occur even amid the bitterest rivalries. During the Cold War, the superpowers collaborated to limit the danger of nuclear war, inhibit nuclear proliferation, and eradicate smallpox. In the new twilight struggle, there may be opportunities to regulate the role of destabilizing military technologies and address the intensifying effects of climate change.

The key is to balance such cooperation against the need for advantage in fundamentally competitive relationships. Yes, America should urgently recommit itself to global action on climate change, but it should not make unrelated geopolitical concessions in hopes of smoothing the path to agreement.²⁷ Rather, it should operate on the assumption – validated by history – that rivals can collaborate in areas of common interest even while struggling fiercely where interests clash.²⁸

Avoiding Distraction. A grand strategy focused on great-power rivalry cannot ignore other issues. Iran is pursuing its own campaign of revisionism in the Middle East; what happens in theaters outside Europe and the Indo-Pacific will deeply affect U.S. relations with China and Russia. If Washington walks away from existing commitments, it may find itself having to re-intervene later, at a higher cost, after threats have metastasized. Yet every grand strategy involves painful prioritization, because there are never enough resources, attention, and political will to go around.

Deterring a nuclear North Korea is essential; waging war to prevent Pyongyang from developing an ICBM capability would be a tragic diversion. Containing Iranian influence in the Middle East will require some coercive measures, but provoking a diplomatic or military crisis would constitute grand strategic profligacy. Counterterrorism cannot be abandoned, but neither can it be allowed to consume outsized amounts of resources indefinitely. Instead, Washington must adopt – and stick to – a counterterrorism strategy based on suppressing the most dangerous threats at a manageable cost and accepting the slightly higher risks that result.²⁹ More generally, America will need a problem-management rather than a problem-solving approach to challenges outside the new twilight struggle.

Winning the Contest of Systems. All of these measures reside in the realm of foreign policy. But the clash between America and its authoritarian rivals is ultimately a contest of systems – a measure of whose political, social, and economic model functions better at home and abroad. The cardinal sin of grand strategy is to take steps that tarnish the image or impair the performance of the American system. The trick is to use protracted rivalry to catalyze reforms that make that system stronger.

America has done this before. During the 1950s, the federal government supported school de-segregation and created the interstate highway system as ways of better competing with Moscow.³⁰ During the late 1980s and early 1990s, fears about coming Japanese dominance pushed Washington to balance the budget. The modern-day equivalent might be using the Chinese and Russian threats to spur enhanced public investment in education and infrastructure, sponsor intensive research and development in breakthrough technologies, address long-term fiscal challenges, and reform a democracy that is choking on gridlock and dysfunction. George Kennan once wrote that Americans should “experience a certain gratitude to Providence” that the Cold War had “made their entire security as a nation dependent on pulling themselves together.”³¹ To preserve the world it has built, America must revive that spirit today.

Conclusion

The question that arises in any discussion of grand strategy today is: Is it politically feasible? The costs and risks of a grand strategy of preservation would be considerable, as would the dislocation caused for some domestic groups (particularly those deeply entangled economically with China). There are deeply worrying

signs about whether the American people still support an ambitious, expensive global agenda: In recent presidential elections, they repeatedly have chosen candidates that have promised to do less in the world rather than more.

Yet the political prospects are still better than they might initially appear. Presidential idiosyncrasies aside, there is strong bipartisan support for competition with Russia and an emerging consensus on getting tougher with China. In particular, there is a growing recognition that the latter country represents a comprehensive threat to American interests – a challenge that spans the military, diplomatic, economic, and ideological realms.³² Although the opinion polling is ambiguous, there also are indications that Americans have become slightly *more* committed to global engagement since Trump’s election, perhaps because the deterioration of the international order has reminded them why that engagement matters in the first place.³³ If nations need enemies to give them a sense of purpose and a spur to action, then an assertive American grand strategy may be politically feasible, after all.

It is, admittedly, hard to imagine this president – who continually has talked down U.S. foreign policy – making the case for any positive grand strategic agenda. Indeed, although the Trump administration has increased military spending, shaken up the relationship with China, and articulated the *need* for a more competitive grand strategy, it has taken so many steps that have weakened the international order and made America less geopolitically effective.³⁴ But the next administration will have an opportunity to build consensus behind a more constructive approach, provided that it undertakes a concerted campaign to educate the public on how the authoritarian challenge menaces American interests and values, and what a responsible but vigorous response might entail. This won’t require threat inflation or cynical efforts to “scare the hell out of the American people.” Simply explaining the truth would be frightening enough.

A grand strategy of preservation may not be sexy: A generational effort to hold the line and gradually ramp up the pressure on American adversaries recalls Lord Vansittart’s description of “an endless game played for a joyless victory.”³⁵ Yet America has thrived in long-term competition before. Executing the grand strategy described here is vital to beating back a new authoritarian challenge and averting the emergence of a more brutal, illiberal world in which America’s own future would be imperiled.

GRAND STRATEGY FOR A NEW TWILIGHT STRUGGLE

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**PASSING THE TORCH:
CRITERIA FOR IMPLEMENTING A GRAND
STRATEGY OF OFFSHORE BALANCING**

JASEN J. CASTILLO

Under what conditions should the United States remove its armed forces from a particular region? When is it okay to leave? What is the best way to depart? How should we weigh the benefits and risks of any departure?

Over the last two decades, these questions have not been part of the mainstream conversation about American grand strategy.¹ Instead, discussions about significantly curtailing the U.S. presence military abroad mostly took place in intellectually subversive backwaters, like academia or at the Cato Institute. With President Donald Trump at the helm of U.S. foreign policy, however, the possibility that the U.S. military would come home from its different global garrisons has moved from a gleam in Patrick Buchanan's eye to serious proposals for withdrawal. Indeed, over the last two years, the Trump administration, usually via the Twitter machine, has questioned the benefits of the U.S. presence in South Korea, our commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the counterterrorism mission in Syria. Whether out of a fit of pique, to pursue some larger scheme, or both, the President has radically changed how we discuss America's role in the world, especially the value of stationing U.S. armed forces overseas. Even a few of his critics on the progressive left have begun to articulate a similar version of American grand strategy.²

Altering alliances, and especially reducing their attendant military commitments, contradicts the conventional wisdom about U.S. grand strategy.³ Since the end of the Cold War, the consensus in Washington holds that a robust American military presence abroad sets the foundation for a peaceful, perhaps even liberal, international order.⁴ A grand strategy of primacy, according to the mandarins of U.S. foreign policy, is not only beneficial for the United States, but is good for all status quo powers. Stationed abroad, American forces deter aggression, pacify former rivals, and keep the seas open for global commerce. At the same time, the United States reinforces peace by promoting free markets, democratic regimes, and international institutions.⁵ Most experts believe if the United States acts wisely, it can play the role of international sheriff well into the future.⁶

Critics of this conventional wisdom call for abandoning primacy in favor of a more restrained grand strategy.⁷ The problem, in their view, reflects a lack of serious discussion about the core interests of the United States,⁸ left as the only superpower in 1991.

Policymakers answered the question of “What areas of the world are worth fighting and dying for?” with a not well considered “Most of them.” According to advocates of restraint, this expansive conception of national interest is wrongheaded. As evidence of primacy's failure, they point to wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. These idealistic ventures wasted American blood and treasure. They also created more instability.⁹ By following the advice of experts to “try harder” in the Middle East, the United States has squandered resources, while China rises and Russia rebounds. To preserve American power, restraint proponents argue the United States should pursue narrow national interests and pare down its military commitments abroad.¹⁰

In many ways, these scholars of restraint echo some of President Trump's themes on foreign policy. Although he talks like a restrainer, it remains unclear if he eventually will behave like one.¹¹ Trump has been both good and bad for restraint.¹² On the upside, he has questioned the underlying assumptions of our U.S. grand strategy of primacy. On the downside, his erratic foreign policy, marked by hasty changes and abrupt reversals in deployments, makes restraint look reckless.

If restraint, then, is going to become a viable alternative to our current grand strategy, the case for it needs to evolve from a normative discussion of why the United States should do less. It also needs more coherence and judgment than Trump's instinct to withdraw American forces on what seems like a whim. The next phase of the debate should outline how to prudently practice restraint. To that end, this paper offers a framework for how to implement a more restrained grand strategy. Specifically, I outline how and why the United States could adopt a grand strategy of offshore balancing, an approach popular among proponents of restraint. The variant of this strategy that I present here envisions putting the military burden for European security back on Europeans, significantly pares down the U.S. military presence in the Middle East, and reduces the American presence in East Asia. I derive a set of criteria that aim to help policymakers weight the costs and benefits of reducing U.S. forces in a region. These criteria not only explain the best conditions for passing the torch to regional powers for their own security, but also could provide for a better discussion of U.S. grand strategy in general. My goal is to move the debate on American grand strategy generally, and among the restraint family in particular, from the normative case for why the United States should do less to how we could do less.

Roots and Principles of Restraint

In very broad terms, grand strategy “represents an integrated scheme of interests, threats, resources, and policies.”¹³ It provides principles to guide a state’s foreign policy.¹⁴ More narrowly, grand strategy is a country’s theory about how it will obtain security and defend its other national interests.¹⁵ A grand strategy should outline a country’s interests, the threats to those interests and the policies to defend them. Some scholars see grand strategies as too formulaic and constrictive for the practical conduct of day-to-day foreign policy, a kind of intellectual straitjacket that could prove dangerous. Better to detail a country’s interests and remain flexible about how to pursue them. The consensus disagrees, viewing grand strategy as useful, as long as policymakers do not adhere to it mindlessly.¹⁶ President Ronald Reagan’s successful foreign policy, for example, stemmed from his administration’s willingness to abandon the Cold War script of competition with the Soviet Union in favor of cooperation.¹⁷

Because it proved effective in winning the Cold War, the best-known American grand strategy is containment.¹⁸ As the scheme crafted to guide U.S. foreign policy after World War II, containment focused on preventing the expansion of the Soviet Union’s military and political power into regions deemed critical to U.S. interests.¹⁹ Because many scholars tend to hail containment as a success, we often forget that it was not a uniform grand strategy. Policymakers often disagreed about which parts of the world deserved defending and what instruments the United States should use to do so. These differences explain why the meaning of containment varied over time. Those who favored a narrower conception of containment, or finite containment, aimed primarily on keeping Western Europe and Japan outside the Soviet orbit. Still others argued that

If restraint is going to become a viable alternative to our current grand strategy, the case for it needs to evolve from a normative discussion of why the United States should do less.

the United States needed to roll back the Soviets in their third world enclaves and Eastern Europe as well. Some American leaders sought to reach a modus vivendi with Soviet leaders, while others approached cooperation with more trepidation.

The collapse of the Soviet Union prompted a national conversation, albeit a brief one, about what path the United States should pursue next.²⁰ Flushed from the success of the Cold War, American policymakers quickly decided to pursue a grand strategy of primacy. U.S. policy aims first to prevent the emergence of another peer competitor like the Soviet Union. Primacy seeks to preserve what Charles Krauthammer called the “Unipolar Moment.” This strategy depends on American military supremacy to deter the rise of some great powers, while U.S. alliances would remove incentive for the rise of others.²¹ The quick, decisive victory in the Gulf War seemed to offer proof of American dominance in conventional military operations.

American primacy embodies the proverbial mailed fist inside a velvet glove. Over the last 20 years, the United States has promoted institutions, free-market capitalism, and democracy as the foundation of a rules-based international system. These efforts fit what President George H. W. Bush called the “New World Order.” In this world, institutions prevent states from fighting, democratic governments resolve disputes with one another peacefully, and globalization inspires trade more than war. Pundits like Tom Friedman would explain this new version of international politics as the triumph of the “Lexus” over the “olive tree.” Even so, as the RAND Corporation noted at the time, “[T]he posture and capabilities of the U.S. armed forces remain central factors in global stability. Put simply, the United States is the world’s preeminent military power and the chief ‘exporter of security.’”²² In this era as the preeminent military power, we have embarked on numerous military interventions, changed several regimes by force, expanded our military footprint abroad, and expanded the number of member states in NATO.

Those in favor of restraint, in contrast, conclude that finite containment worked, our Cold War alliances have served their purpose, and, with abundant security, the United States can afford to draw back from the global commitments required to defeat the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War represents an opportunity to recover from a dangerous, costly four-decade security competition. Primacy, they worry, trades one

narrow but ambitious international mission for a more expansive role for the United States in world politics. Acting as the globe’s “reluctant sheriff,” they warn, does not serve American interests. Instead, it squanders the country’s power and ultimately will prove self-defeating.

This disagreement between advocates of primacy and proponents of restraint reflects differences in the principles guiding grand strategy. The term “restraint” refers to a broad community of scholars who believe that the United States would do well to do less. They define U.S. interests narrowly. Most limit the country’s core interests to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the safety of the homeland.²³ Proponents of restraint also see force as a blunt instrument. Together, this conception of interests and pessimism about the application of military power significantly restricts the conditions under which the United States should project its armed forces abroad. The bar for military interventions is therefore, high. Since they can end up making matters worse, policymakers should exercise caution with humanitarian missions, and eschew military occupations, because they breed resentment and resistance among local populations.

Most importantly, restraint advocates believe that the odds do not favor the United States remaining the world’s sole superpower. With no peer competitor to oppose it, American policymakers risk over-extension. They embark on foolish ventures that may advance U.S. objectives in the short term, but weaken its power position in the long term. American wars in the Middle East over the last 18 years illustrate this destructive tendency. At the same time, because states balance against power, attempts to maintain military supremacy become self-defeating. Competitors, with a healthy instinct for survival, imitate and innovate to counter American military power. Eventually, new great powers will rise. As the fictional British Prime Minister Francis Urquhart remarks about the fall of Margaret Thatcher in the first (and best!) version of the television series, *House of Cards*: “Nothing lasts forever. Even the longest, the most glittering reign must come to an end someday.”

Different approaches to grand strategy exist within the restraint community. Among this group, the consensus holds that sound reasons exist for some amount of contraction. After all, retrenchment historically has allowed great powers to recover from costly competitions.²⁴ Without the Soviet threat, the United States can and should reduce its military commitments and spending. In this strategic environment, some think this means America should come home.²⁵ For others, it depends on the region.²⁶ Some see an overall reduction as the best approach.²⁷

Adopting a Grand Strategy of Offshore Balancing

Offshore balancing represents one well-known grand strategy from the restraint family. According to this strategy, the United States should focus narrowly on

three core interests: protecting the homeland from attack, defending its territorial integrity, and preserving its sovereignty. The greatest threat to American interests, in this view, is another great power that can dominate its region, or a regional hegemon.²⁸ International terrorist groups pose another threat when capable of attacking the U.S. homeland. This narrow conception of interest is the defining feature separating supporters of offshore balancing, and restraint in general, from those who simply want to adjust our current grand strategy.²⁹

In pursuit of these fundamental national interests, this strategy argues that the United States should project military power into a region only when local powers cannot address threats, especially those of a potential peer competitor. The best way to project U.S. interests, this strategy argues, is to shore up a region’s balance of power. In practice this means, the United States should shift the burden of most military interventions on regional powers. U.S. armed forces represent the tool of last resort, tipping the balance of power in the favor of the United States and its allies.³⁰

A grand strategy of offshore balancing passes the torch of security to regional powers. Local countries take the lead in deterring and defending against threats, especially on land. As a hedge, the United States would put the bulk of its military resources into maintaining strong air and naval forces that could aid regional powers as a last resort. Naval power in particular is the key ingredient for an effective strategy of offshore balancing. A strong navy, including a few overseas bases, will help the United States to retain its command of the blue water commons. Mastery of the seas give the United States the ability to keep opponents at a distance and, in an emergency, project power to regions in need of assistance.

Critics of offshore balancing raise the issue of two primary risks associated with leaving a region. First, they worry that U.S. withdrawal could spark wars among regional powers. Once the United States departs, local disputes can turn into rivalries, and eventually war. These conflicts can prove even more dangerous because some countries might possess nuclear weapons. The concern is that once the United States leaves Europe, for example, World War III will break out. Only the American pacifier can keep the continent safe. Critics make a similar argument about terrorism. If the United States leaves the Middle East, terrorist groups on the ropes will bounce back. And, should war happen, the United States will feel compelled to return. Of course, war might happen even if the United States remains. Emboldened allies could trap the United States in disputes that are of peripheral interests. Still further, the

United States does not automatically intervene in every conflict, even though it might seem that way these days.

Second, critics also fear that nuclear proliferation will increase if American forces leave a region.³¹ U.S. extended deterrence guarantees represent the best way to prevent nuclear proliferation. With American protection, capable countries do not feel compelled to acquire nuclear weapons. This danger is less alarming than it seems. Preventing nuclear proliferation can prove difficult if a country is hell-bent on obtaining a nuclear arsenal. Happily, predictions of proliferation cascades tend to exaggerate the rate of nuclear acquisition. It also is not obvious why new nuclear powers would increase the risk of war. In fact, their nuclear weapons might deter war. One also can imagine policies that help new nuclear states to ameliorate safety concerns, something we eschew today. Further, the current grand strategy of primacy and its emphasis on regime change have done much to convince countries in the United States' crosshairs to reach for nuclear weapons. Finally, extending deterrence with nuclear weapons is harder and more dangerous than if a country uses its own nuclear weapons to deter aggression.

Ideally, the United States could act as a balancer of last resort in each region, intervening only when locals cannot prevent one power from becoming a hegemon.

The United States, however, can manage these risks by how it implements offshore balancing. I envision offshore balancing as a grand strategy the United States can tailor to specific regions. There are four possible variants. Each version of the strategy comes with its own risks and benefits. Ideally, the United States could act as a *balancer of last resort* in each region, intervening only when locals cannot prevent one power from becoming a hegemon. American policy followed this script in World Wars I and II. The danger here is that the United States comes into a conflict too late. During the Cold War, the United States played the role of *onshore balancer* in Europe. The risk here is that the war the United States seeks to deter happens anyway, which is why extended deterrence was so dangerous during the Cold War.

Two additional variants of offshore balancing deserve attention. U.S. military forces can perform a *discrete*

mission in a region. Operation Just Cause, the 1989–90 takedown of Manuel Noriega's regime in Panama, represents a good model of military action to secure a peripheral interest with limited scope. Of course, the danger in this instance is that the United States succumbs to mission creep and a discrete step grows into a larger, longer-term intervention. Finally, the United States can establish a *limited presence* in a region. A good example of this kind of regional role is Operation Earnest Will of 1987–88, in which the U.S. Navy protected Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War. The potential downside of this strategy is that the United States sends insufficient forces to perform the mission.

When to Pass the Torch: Criteria for Evaluating Benefits and Risks of Leaving

How, then, do we implement a strategy of offshore balancing? How do we pass the torch? My goal is to move the debate on American grand strategy generally from *why* the United States should do less to *how* we could do less. In this way, we can do a better job comparing grand strategic options. Any transition to offshore balancing should take place slowly and deliberately, with a clear-eyed approach to managing potential downsides. Prudent policymaking requires balancing some risks and benefits. Therefore, as the United States transitions to a strategy of offshore balancing, policymakers should ask the following six questions for each region to determine the depth of American commitment.

Is There a Military Threat to Core U.S. Interests in the Region?

First and foremost, policymakers need to know if there is a country that can conquer or dominate a specific region. Recall, a grand strategy of offshore balancing identified a potential peer competitor as the greatest threat to U.S. security. The United States does not want a country to replicate in its home region America's unique status as the only great power. Such a state can marshal resources that would enable it to generate enough military power to oppose the United States in the Western Hemisphere. For this reason, the United States, when capable, has intervened in Europe and East Asia to prevent a country from conquering its region. Historical examples of countries that attempted to become regional hegemonies, and failed, include Napoleonic France, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union, and Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany.

Determining the threat of a potential hegemon requires evaluating a number of factors. Certainly, the usual quantitative measures, like gross domestic product and military spending, matter greatly.³² Beyond these

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usual suspects, however, analysts should consider several qualitative metrics that can enhance or depreciate these broader measures of military power. The types of forces a country can use in a theater also govern the level of threat. Additionally, analysts should conduct net assessments of the military missions a near peer might want to perform. Net assessments combine quantitative measures with qualitative metrics to obtain a more complete picture of the military threat a potential adversary poses.³³ These types of analyses work best when they include the military skill and will of an opponent.³⁴ Lastly, defense planners should evaluate the power projection capabilities of potential hegemons. Possessing impressive military capabilities is not enough to influence international politics if a country cannot also deploy and sustain its forces.³⁵

Are there Benefits of a Reduced Presence?

Second, what benefits can the United States obtain by withdrawing from a region? In each region, a grand strategy of offshore balancing offers the United States three potentially attractive benefits. First, it lowers the possibility that the United States will become entrapped in conflicts that are peripheral to its interests. Barry Posen rightly worries that allies, confident in U.S. security guarantees, could drag the United States into unnecessary wars.³⁶ Second, reducing the American military presence lowers the possibility that the United States will become locked into spirals of hostilities with potential adversaries. When forward deployed and targeting some countries, U.S. armed forces can bolster nationalist narratives about American aggression. Regimes can use this kind of rhetoric to bolster their domestic stability at the United States' expense. Third, a strategy of offshore balancing tries hard to avoid military occupations because local populations, more often than not, resist foreign constabulary forces.³⁷

Can a Reduced Presence Give the United States a Competitive Advantage?

Third, can the United States reduce its military presence in a region that plays to its strengths rather than its weaknesses? The ability of the United States to abandon dangerous as well as difficult extended deterrence

commitments represents a crucial advantage of offshore balancing. American policy should aim to put likely adversaries in circumstances making it too costly for them to compete with the United States.³⁸ Although the United States continues to command the commons,

the contested zones remain painful places to conduct military operations. For example, China and Russia continue to deploy air defenses and antiship missiles that make it difficult for the United States to operate close to their coastlines. A wiser posture would force competitors to contemplate military missions outside of their well-defended anti-access, area-denial bubbles. On land, major powers continue to improve their conventional forces. Weaker opponents can rely on guerrilla warfare and insurgency – methods of fighting that do not play to American strengths and undermine long, nation-building campaigns.

Moreover, in many possible conflicts today, the stakes favor opponents. Under these circumstances, American adversaries have great incentive to risk higher levels of violence to obtain their objectives.³⁹ This imbalance of stakes could translate into two concrete problems for U.S. armed forces. An opponent might risk the first use of nuclear weapons to avoid defeat, calculating that the United States will capitulate since the costs of fighting far outweigh any benefits.⁴⁰ In long wars, such as insurgencies, adversaries can wear down the American will to fight.⁴¹

What Are Risks to Core U.S. Interests of Reduced Presence?

Fourth, will reductions in a region hurt core U.S. interests? Critics might list a number of downsides to offshore balancing. However, given the narrow conception of core national interests that drive this grand strategy, two dangers stand out from the rest. Both focus on the rise of a U.S. peer competitor. American planners might worry about regional great-power rivalries that spiral into arms races. Not every security competition ought to concern U.S. policymakers, only the rare ones that could result in one power emerging as regional hegemon. Relatedly, the United States should calculate whether a rising peer competitor could persuade countries to bandwagon rather than balance against it. Since countries interested in survival tend to align against powerful neighbors, the likelihood of rampant bandwagoning behavior seems unlikely. With respect to terrorism, the typical argument is that U.S. withdrawal from a region can embolden

non-state actors or create a favorable environment for them to operate. Of course, an American presence on the ground is no guarantee of stability and also can create a fertile breeding ground for terrorism.

Can Local Powers Replace the United States As Balancer?

Fifth, policymakers need to understand if local powers establish a balance of power. The United States can hedge against regional threats if local powers possess the capabilities and intentions to serve as the first line of defense. Obviously, this requires countries wealthy enough to field appropriate armed forces. The tendency of states toward a balance of power can provide incentives for local countries to translate their wealth into military power and to cooperate against common threats. Worries about fighting a dangerous opponent without can paper over even ideological differences among countries.⁴² Most of the time, the United States can find a few countries to which they can pass the buck. The exception, of course, might occur after a major war, when regional powers need time to recover. American forces might have to come onshore to restore a regional balance if local countries face a potential hegemon. A slow, deliberate drawdown of U.S. forces can give countries in a region time to prepare for security independence.

Can Local Powers Accommodate Regional Opponents?

Finally, can an offshore balancing strategy encourage regional powers to reach some accommodation with their neighbors? Even powerful states see war as a dangerous way to achieve their aims and frequently prefer concessions to conflict.⁴³ Local powers, sensitive to the dynamics of the security dilemma, can signal their benign intentions by how they posture their military forces. If the U.S. departure does not result in arms racing, then that could telegraph to other local powers that they are setting aside any short-term anxieties for long-term bargains. Before leaving, the United States could encourage regional powers to establish spheres of influence, drawing clear lines of interest to avoid conflicts. Existing regional security institutions could assist in such agreements. A clear status quo can reduce the probability of conflicts stemming from misperceptions. Furthermore, a gradual reduction in the American presence can motivate regional powers to accommodate one another.⁴⁴

Implementing Restraint: Offshore Balancing in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia

What would a grand strategy of offshore balancing look like in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia today? Most students of national security would consider these three regions the most important to U.S. national security. As we would expect, tailoring offshore balance according to the above six criteria leads to a different American force posture in each region. Below, I describe three variants of offshore balancing.

Closing Time in Europe: The United States as Balancer of Last Resort

In Europe, the United States should return to its role as region's balancer of last resort. This new role means U.S. forces should gradually transition out of Europe, leaving local NATO members to carry the burden. The United States, however, should not abandon the alliance. Ideally, the United States would remain part of NATO, but shift the responsibility of the continent's first line of defense to Europeans. Specifically, American air and ground forces should leave Europe. Policymakers should decide which naval bases the U.S. might require to continue its maritime command of the commons.

This transition is overdue, with the fall of the Soviet Union almost three decades past. U.S. policymakers should explain honestly to their allies that the United States needs to protect interests elsewhere, and current conditions favor Europeans taking up the torch of self-defense. Currently, no country in Europe poses a threat to core American interests. This greatly differs from the previous century, when the United States twice had to intervene to prevent German hegemony, later winning the opportunity to prevent Soviet domination of the continent. Today, and likely well into the future, no candidate hegemon exists. Consider the situation in Western Europe. There, the frequently expressed worry that without the American pacifier the continent would return to its warring ways appears wildly overblown. With strong economic ties, numerous international institutions, British and French nuclear weapons, and several strong democracies, a rerun of World War I or II does not seem in the cards.

A potential hegemon emerging from the east also seems a very remote possibility. With apologies to Vladimir Putin, Russia cannot become the Soviet Union anytime soon. Russia lacks the economic foundation and population to control Eurasia. In many respects, it looks like Texas with nuclear weapons, and without some of

the Lone Star State's economic as well as demographic potential.⁴⁵ More importantly, Russia cannot project enough military power to conquer and to hold the territory of most NATO members.⁴⁶ Russia could threaten the Baltic countries, but even there it would risk the same kind of grinding insurgency it suffers in Ukraine today.

Ideally, the United States would remain part of NATO, but shift the responsibility of the continent's first line of defense to Europeans.

In many ways, the United States has positioned itself in a terrible security position in Europe. Given that core American interests face no threat, this situation makes no sense. The United States and its NATO allies did a terrible job accommodating a defeated, post-Cold War Russia. On top of broken promises over NATO expansion, the United States abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and then placed missile defenses near the former Soviet Union.⁴⁷ The enlargement of NATO obligated the United States to protect countries not representing core U.S. interests.

Even worse, these new members, especially the Baltic states, will prove hard to defend should Russia invade. NATO intervention would require battering down Russian air defenses and overcoming its cruise missile gauntlet. Should NATO forces liberate their Baltic allies, U.S. officials fear Russia would mount a limited nuclear attack to secure victory. The recent Nuclear Posture Review agonizes over this possibility, arguing for new capabilities to deter Russia from using nuclear weapons as a means for preventing defeat on a conventional battlefield. Ironically, during the Cold War, NATO made the exact same threat to deter a Soviet invasion of West Germany. Deterring a country from using nuclear weapons as you prepare to apply the coup de grace is mission impossible.⁴⁸

One way to avoid this nightmare scenario is for the United States to pass the defense of Europe to local NATO allies. Because of their impressive wealth, NATO's European members possess more than enough capacity to provide for their own defense. This observation does not bear on the debate about whether NATO's European partners contribute enough military spending to the alliance. Frankly, that conversation obscures a larger issue: The American presence provides no incentive for self-defense. Even so, France, Germany, and the United

Kingdom have begun to discuss security initiatives they could adopt should the United States leave.⁴⁹

Interestingly, it does not seem clear that the United States' NATO partners, at least those in the west, view Russia as a threat. Germany, after all, continues to purchase natural gas from Russia. Rather than fight on the periphery of the old Soviet Union, then, Europeans should recognize a Russian sphere of influence and decide where they want and don't want to fight. This kind of decision is best left to our NATO allies in Europe. Announcing the U.S. decision to remove its armed forces from the region should persuade these countries to begin contemplating their own core interests in Europe.

Paring Down in the Middle East: A Discrete Counterterrorism Mission

The only threat to core U.S. interests in the Middle East is a terrorist attack against the American homeland. At the moment, no country possesses the capability to become a regional hegemon. Iran and Saudi Arabia may have hegemonic aspirations, but they lack the military capabilities to project power and to conquer territory. States in the region might own vast oil resources, but it remains unlikely that one country will emerge to control them. Should a local power interfere with the free flow of oil, the United States has demonstrated its ability and willingness to come onshore to protect it. Still further, the dependence of the U.S. economy on oil from the Middle East has declined significantly over the last 40 years.

From Yemen to Syria, regional conflicts continue to afflict the Middle East. Recent American attempts to act both as a regional pacifier and an exporter of democracy contribute to this instability. As the last two decades have demonstrated, local powers are better suited to dealing with them.⁵⁰ More importantly, these local disputes fall outside core American interests.

With this narrow conception of American interests, a grand strategy of offshore balancing would call for the discrete deployment of U.S. armed forces to prevent terrorist groups from controlling large territorial sanctuaries. Specifically, the United States should maintain its small mission in the Middle East to cooperate with local forces to roll back territory held by ISIS. Ideally, the United States would continue using air power to aid allied ground forces clearing the last remnants of ISIS sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq. As part of the American effort to retain mastery of the seas, to command the commons, the U.S. Navy should retain its facilities in Bahrain.

Recently, President Trump declared operations against ISIS a success, and therefore, at an end. Since ISIS still controls territory, this declaration seems premature. Although a compelling case for removing U.S. armed force exists, American planners need to ensure that they have accomplished their mission. Some analysts believe defeating ISIS, al Qaeda, and other international terrorist groups requires a persistent U.S. presence in the Middle East. Defeating an idea takes decades, not years.⁵¹ Proponents of offshore balancing argue that the best counterterrorism strategy seeks to prevent these groups from controlling territory. A small footprint and discrete over-watch missions serve American interests better than permanent deployments. In this view, the Obama and Trump administrations took the right approach.⁵² However, the decision to remove U.S. forces from the ISIS fight seems premature. The current administration should declare victory when ISIS no longer controls territory. This approach is different from advocating a long war on terrorism.

Most U.S. armed forces, then, should leave the region. As part of a slow transition out of the area, the United States should continue pursuing a peace agreement with the Taliban to end the conflict in Afghanistan. If 18 years of nation building have failed to bring peace, then it is foolish to keep trying the same failed strategy. “Try harder” and “stay the course” are slogans, not strategies. Unfortunately, the United States cannot and should not permanently garrison the country. Some worry that the American departure will not only mean a return to civil war in Afghanistan, but that this instability will have deleterious effects on Pakistan. This represents a legitimate concern. Both possibilities could erupt even with American forces garrisoning Afghanistan, however, providing more reasons to leave now.

Sharpening the Focus with a Limited Presence in East Asia

The rise of China as a potential peer competitor poses the greatest long-term threat to U.S. interests in East Asia. If a Chinese bid for hegemony occurs, it will happen down the road. In terms of economic might, China’s wealth matches, and by some measures, has overtaken the United States’. However, Beijing cannot do much today to militarily challenge Washington in the Western Pacific. For certain, China over the last two decades has made it more costly and difficult for the U.S. Navy to command the air over the Taiwan Strait, should the need arise. Chinese military modernization has focused on keeping American forces away, improving the survivability of its nuclear forces, and building professionalism.

To change the balance of power, China would need better power projection capabilities.⁵³ Concerns about economic growth, competition with local powers, and anxieties over access to energy resources could hinder any of their potential hegemonic ambitions.

Since Chinese hegemony represents a long-term concern, the more pressing risk is that the United States becomes embroiled in other regional disputes that at best represent peripheral interests. The United States should take three steps to reduce the probability it becomes entrapped in such conflicts. Each of those steps also encourage local powers to exercise more caution and independence as they provide for their own security. First, the United States should withdraw any commitment, informal or otherwise, to defend Taiwan. China cares more about Taiwan than the United States does, and defending the island nation is becoming an increasingly difficult task.⁵⁴

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Second, U.S. forces should withdrawal from the Korean Peninsula. The Republic of Korea is both economically and militarily capable of providing for its own defense.⁵⁵ Analysts of American foreign policy constantly worry that South Korea will break ranks with the United States to improve relations with North Korea. We should encourage this kind of rapprochement. Here is an instance where decoupling is good. The United States should retain its security alliance with South Korea, moving from a frontline provider of security to a balancer of last resort.

Third, the United States should renegotiate its alliance with Japan to give it more security independence. As part of the new arrangement, American air and ground forces should leave Japan. In the contrast, American naval forces should remain, since they provide the U.S. with the decisive tool to command the maritime commons.⁵⁶ This naval infrastructure not only allows the United States to continue securing the sea-lanes of communication and commerce, but also provides a hedge in case it needs to surge forces to the region.

A reduced, limited presence in the Western Pacific also represents the best way to manage the rise of China. Since it is nowhere as militarily powerful as the Soviet Union in its heyday, China does not require the United States to rush toward containment. Competition between the United States and China need not look like the Cold War.⁵⁷ Because China lives in a more dangerous neighborhood, The United States may pursue a more cautious, long-term strategy for China's rise. The United States can use this situation to its advantage. American efforts to accommodate Chinese concerns by carving out regional spheres of influence could go a long way in reducing spirals of hostility between Washington and Beijing.⁵⁸ In concrete terms, the United States has to choose its battles wisely. Take, for instance, disputes in the South China Sea. There, the United States only should take action if China obtains the capability to challenge American command of the maritime commons.

Conclusion: Changing the Discourse on Restraint

This paper aims at changing the discourse about grand strategy, especially arguments in favor of restraint. Those who believe that U.S. armed forces should not play the role of global sheriff have made compelling normative arguments in support of this position. Now, the debate needs to address how the United States can adopt more restrained strategies. To that end, I outline how American policymakers could adopt a grand strategy of offshore balancing. I present some criteria for evaluating the risk and benefits of removing U.S. forces from specific regions.

These criteria could improve current debates about grand strategy. Even with all the mistakes it has made in the last two decades, the United States remains very powerful. Nevertheless, "American exceptionalism" will not keep the United States at the top ranks of the great powers forever. The history of international politics suggests those who goes up must come down. This should motivate a deeper debate about how best to define American interests and the threats to them. Right now, peripheral or second-order concerns sidetrack debates about U.S. grand strategy. Many prefer to discuss tactics, techniques, and procedures rather than thinking through the principles guiding our foreign and defense policies. Disputes over the best way to take down Chinese air defenses in a fight over Taiwan overshadow deeper issues, like if it is wise for the United States to defend Taiwan in the first place. Whether this reflects a lack of imagination, or the pernicious powers of "The Blob,"

remains unclear. Defending the status quo is always easier than change.

President Trump's Twitter feed and disjointed foreign policy complicates the conversation about grand strategy. One moment he warms the heart of the restraint community by criticizing NATO. The next moment he breaks their hearts by declaring U.S. forces will remain in Iraq to contain Iran. This chaos, however, comes with a silver lining. By questioning deeply held assumptions about American grand strategy, he creates a space for a more public examination of core U.S. interests. Advocates of restraint should take advantage of this opening to present not only the rationale for doing less, but to explain how the United States could implement such policies. The key to persuading the American public and policymakers about the wisdom of grand strategies such as offshore balancing depends in no small part on systematically showing how the benefits outweigh the risks.

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**A U.S. GRAND STRATEGY
FOR A VALUES-DRIVEN FOREIGN POLICY**

KATE KIZER

“Might it not be that a great force that has always been thinking in terms of human needs, and that always will think in terms of human needs, has not been mobilized?”

—Jeanette Rankin

The 2016 presidential election was an earthquake for Washington’s foreign policy establishment. Donald Trump defeated a slew of candidates who sought to maintain the bipartisan consensus on the United States’ role in the world. Astonishment quickly turned to defense of the so-called rules-based international order, that many had believed would continue to organize the world in perpetuity following the Cold War.

Yet Trump, a wannabe strongman, has had no qualms exposing his disdain for human rights and international norms that have purportedly guided American decisionmaking on the world stage since World War II. As a result, his presidency has exposed significant weaknesses in the international and domestic institutions supporting the U.S.-led world order and the folly of defending a system whose weaknesses helped fuel his rise to power.

For better or worse, the past two years of Trump’s presidency have created an opportunity for a significant course correction in U.S. foreign policy. It is time for a bold reimagining of the United States’ role in the world based on an honest, unparalleled analysis of U.S. conduct since the end of the Cold War. It will not be enough to attempt to return to business as usual. This pivotal moment requires the United States to put forth a vision for overseas engagement rooted in values-driven principles. Such an approach would allow the U.S. to truly work in solidarity with those seeking a more peaceful and just world.

The “Benign” Hegemony of U.S. Leadership

In 1991, the U.S. emerged victorious in the Cold War, which had long exacerbated conflict in remote parts of the world as the United States and Soviet Union competed for influence. This competition drove the United States to try to stop the spread of communism at seemingly any cost – whether through the forced installation of friendly (often military) dictatorships or through wars of attrition against communist insurgencies. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States maintained a drive for military superiority and influence, believing that remaining the world’s sole superpower was a strategic imperative.

The consensus view that U.S. military superiority helped it prevail over the Soviet Union codified the belief that U.S. security depended on its military dominance over potential rivals. Ground wars and air campaigns were supplemented with a series of alliances, foreign military bases, security cooperation and assistance, and patrols, to prevent the rise of another great power. The United States maintained a spheres-of-influence mentality, as it sought diplomatic and military alliances with regional powers to increase its influence over the foreign policy decisions of countries around the world. Countries under U.S. “tutelage” would receive economic and military benefits through beneficial trade agreements, military assistance, or political legitimization through the stationing of U.S. troops. The underlying assumption of this grand strategy, called primacy,¹ was that the United States’ role as sole superpower meant managing, and in essence controlling, world affairs.

U.S. military power was seen as immutable and was employed to remake the world in the United States’ image. According to this worldview, the spread of democratization, economic development based in free-market capitalism and unfettered international commerce, and human rights would foster stability. Doing so would uphold the U.S.-led order that, in turn, bolstered the power of the United States.

There appear to be few specific articulations of U.S. national interests outside maintaining the United States’ hegemony over world affairs. As American security and prosperity relied on global dominance, the United States believed it had an exceptional right to intervene in world affairs to maintain stability. Any failures to keep the peace were a result of external aggression to the U.S.-led system, rather than systemic limits on U.S. military power to control events in a multicausal world.

It is important to consider that this preference for stability may have had the opposite of the intended effect, that the military approach taken to protect U.S. hegemony may have undermined the economic power of the United States while exposing it to more adversaries, that U.S. actions inconsistent with its stated values of freedom and human rights or the inconsistent application of those values have undermined U.S. credibility as a beacon of them, and that the desire for such control actually has made the United States, the American people, and the world less safe.

Failures of Primacy

The United States' predominant reliance on military intervention to secure its interests has had a deleterious, and in some cases outright disastrous,² effect on the stability of the rules-based international order. The United States' desire for hegemony caused it to take on the role of "world police" during Republican and Democratic administrations alike. As a result, there has been a dramatic increase in U.S. military interventions around the world. Despite the various humanitarian reasons given for those interventions, the reality remains that the United States repeatedly has intervened militarily to protect hegemony over the international order.

The overemphasis on the use of force, however, has led to the decline of the very system it seeks to uphold. The greatest failure of U.S. primacy has been the preventative war framework adopted following the September 11, 2001, attacks – a framework that has engulfed the United States in a seemingly endless global war with ill-defined objectives. Rather than merely retaliating for the 9/11 attacks, the United States reverted to a geographically unlimited conflict against an ideology. Wars often became nation-building exercises that quickly expanded to new venues as extremist violence spread. Nearly 18 years later, the United States "combats terrorism"³ in 80 countries, with active bombing campaigns in seven countries, U.S. troops in combat in 14 countries, and 40 foreign military bases (for counterterrorism purposes) around the world – all at the cost of nearly \$6 trillion.⁴

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Primacy is wholly inadequate to address the causes of extremist violence, which has led to an overblown threat perception: Every *potential* threat is a problem that only can be addressed by the use of military force. This strategy does not uphold an international world system that values human life, human rights, and international law. It merely advances an Americanized view of security that remains obsessed with eradicating any threat to U.S. power, no matter its form. While extremist violence remains a security challenge – particularly to the people in the countries where the United States is at war – it does not pose an existential threat to the U.S. homeland.⁵ Yet 17 years later, the post-9/11 wars have expanded, rather than limited, extremist groups' reach, particularly online, while the number of groups has grown exponentially over the last two decades.

This approach to securing U.S. power has had a devastating effect on people around the world and in the United States. Approximately 500,000 people have died as a result of U.S. military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan alone.⁶ At home, the post-9/11 wars have exacerbated Islamophobia, anti-Muslim hate, and empowered white supremacist movements. The growth of the national security state has subjected Americans to mass surveillance and other civil liberty violations. The state of perpetual war since 9/11 has caused Pentagon spending to reach some of the highest levels in U.S. history – constituting by far the highest portion of federal discretionary spending, with nearly half of the Pentagon's budget going to defense contractors, and little left over to invest in domestic priorities. This reality further undermines the idea that the United States is acting to uphold a rules-based international order that values human rights for all.

Despite the ever-growing evidence that military intervention cannot create democracy nor undermine the spread of extremist violence, there is no serious debate of this strategy in Washington. U.S. foreign policy makers on both sides of the aisle continue to assume that military superiority will allow the U.S. to prevail over extremist violence and rising great-power competitors alike. This assumption justifies clinging to a failed system of military alliances and security structures that gives the veneer of multilateralism, but is in reality a facade for escalatory U.S. unilateralism that benefits elite and corporate financial interests, while ignoring collective security threats like climate change.

Redefining National Interests for a Multipolar World

A new approach is necessary to adapt to the current and future strategic landscape. The challenges of the multipolar world are many, and they are interconnected: China's rising economic prowess that challenges American control of the world's economy, extremist violence that undermines people's safety and the rule of law, control of the world's wealth by a small group of elites and the challenge posed by a growing global authoritarian axis that fuels corruption and seeks to prevent the realization of human rights. The common thread is that these challenges cannot be addressed through the use of military force.

A renewed assessment of U.S. national interests in the world must come from the values that the United States aspires to represent. The United States has by no means fully fulfilled or upheld the aspirational ideals envisioned by the founders of this country in practice. Yet it should remain the goal to realize these values for all Americans, and to facilitate the reali-

U.S. policy makers must define national interests on the basis of upholding aspirational U.S. values, namely safety, solidarity, self-determination, equality, and justice for all.

zation of those same values around the world. There is no one-size-fits-all grand strategy that will apply to every part of the world in which the United States engages, or every security challenge it faces. Rather, U.S. policy makers must define national interests on the basis of upholding aspirational U.S. values, namely safety, solidarity, self-determination, equality, and justice for all.

While suggesting that values could drive U.S. national security decisionmaking in practice may seem idealistic, such skepticism fails to recognize the tipping point the world faces. The United States can no longer maintain its power by imposing its interests on other people around the world. The realpolitik approach to maintaining U.S. dominance has veered too far from moral considerations and exposed that acting without such considerations actually undermines U.S. power. Any redefinition of national

interests therefore must end this dissonance and reckon with the fact that the dysfunction of today indicates the need for a radical reformation of the status quo. Reforms that merely tinker with the current system will not put the United States at the forefront of positive change in the world.

A New Approach to U.S. Engagement in the World: A Values-Driven Foreign Policy

Five values-driven principles should undergird U.S. engagement in the world:

Safety

Building safety in U.S. foreign policy starts with recognizing that all people have the right to safety, as Americans do. Actions that make others less safe are inappropriate responses to the American perception of insecurity. Building safety in the United States requires building collective security for all of humanity. It means acting to secure not only the American people, but also acting in ways that build sustainable human security around the world. Reconceptualizing American security must begin with an abandonment of the militarization of U.S. foreign policy and a reorientation of national security spending to prioritize human needs at home and abroad.

The United States first must end its role as the world's largest purveyor of violence and stop waging wars around the world that force people to flee their homes and that harm the most vulnerable in society. It must end the post-9/11 wars, along with the wars on immigrants and drugs. These wars only militarize U.S. communities and other societies, disproportionately target people of color, and contribute to the United States having the highest rate of incarceration per capita.⁷ Comprehensive U.S. immigration reform, which should welcome refugees, immigrants, and families seeking a better life, is also essential to realizing safety both for Americans and for people around the world. In doing so, the United States can reorient security spending from industries that profit from human suffering to investments in peace building, conflict prevention, climate security, mental health, community policing, and skills training, all of which address human needs at home and around the world.

BUILDING COLLECTIVE SAFETY

The United States remains in a unique position to lead the world in addressing collective security threats

such as climate change and nuclear weapons. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have successfully moved⁸ toward reducing⁹ the spread¹⁰ and number¹¹ of nuclear weapons. The United States should seek to build on this legacy of making the world safer by adopting a No First Use policy, re-entering the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), maintaining the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty, extending the New START agreement, and canceling both the recapitalization of every facet of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the proposed new classes of nuclear weapons.

On climate change, the United States can and should lead on the bold solutions necessary within the next 12 years to prevent the most catastrophic effects of climate change from being realized.¹² The United States must address its role in climate insecurity by implementing a

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ten-year mobilization plan to reorient the U.S. economy toward renewable energy and sustainable development.¹³ This stimulus to the economy would build economic security at home while also putting the United States in a position to lead on implementing the bold, multilateral initiatives necessary to build environmental and human security globally.

BUILDING SAFETY BY REORIENTING SECURITY ASSISTANCE

Building safety also requires a comprehensive, inclusive approach to political and economic development abroad. The United States must reconceptualize and reprioritize its foreign assistance. It should get out of the business of building foreign militaries in the image of the U.S. military – an unattainable goal¹⁴ that often subordinates the will of these countries' citizens to the military¹⁵ and can embroil the United States in gross human rights violations.¹⁶ Instead, security assistance and cooperation should have clear metrics and be limited in scope, such as focusing on building the rule-of-law capacities of police forces and militaries. Such assistance must be offered only on the basis of effective implementation of political and economic benchmarks, as well as guaranteeing non-governmental organizations' unfettered access to

foreign aid. Any military equipment transfers must include more robust pre-vetting and end-use restrictions to prevent misuse. Overall, the United States should reorient the majority of its security assistance to stabilization and conflict prevention that focuses on increasing local capacity for locally led peace building, entrepreneurship, community organizing, and economic empowerment initiatives.

SAFETY AS A POLICY METRIC

Safety provides a useful metric, a principle that would require U.S. foreign policy practitioners to consider if a policy actually will make the people of the subject country safer or if there are better tools that the United States can employ toward that end. It requires the United States to end current policies that vilify

or dehumanize others, or use coercion or force to create safety. It requires policymakers to ask whether saber-rattling rhetoric or economic sanctions will positively change the behavior of a foreign government, or if it will cause the ruling party to hoard resources and take actions that harm its own people. Sometimes this principle

will mean playing a facilitating role to other nations or actors, sometimes it will be mean playing a partnership role, and sometimes it will mean playing a leadership role. Overall, however, it will mean U.S. actions help build collective safety around the world.

Solidarity

Acting in solidarity with people around the world rather than imposing the interests of the United States would be a strategic shift for U.S. foreign policy. For too long, the United States has acted with either disregard or ignorance of local contexts and local drivers to conflict. This shortsighted approach has relied sometimes on aligning with and bolstering repressive governments. As a result, U.S. actions effectively have harmed local reform efforts or, at best, undermined them, resulting in anti-American sentiment and the loss of U.S. credibility on human rights. If the United States is truly interested in advancing human rights, justice, and self-determination for all, the best way to do so is by acting in support of communities around the world working to win systemic change in their societies.

Rather than taking action without consideration of the desires of peoples in other countries, the

United States should prioritize expanding the scope of its engagement in the world from the government level to the societal level to ensure its policies support the needs of local communities. U.S. diplomacy then must focus on engagement with a broad set of local stakeholders, including local civil society, community organizers, youth, and women leaders, who are the engines for change within their societies. U.S. diplomatic engagement also must seek to establish connections between U.S. grassroots movements and others around the world to facilitate coordination to achieve mutual goals of dignity, liberation, and self-determination. This approach will require a significant expansion of the diplomatic corps to a much greater extent than just returning to previous levels of investment in the foreign and civil service that Trump has gutted.

ACTING IN SOLIDARITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Solidarity requires a more consultative approach to align U.S. policy with the rights and needs of people in countries around the world. Backing inherently unstable authoritarian regimes that repress their own people and violate human rights in the Middle East, for example, has allowed military alliances to trump local aspirations for governance and economic reforms. Rather than acting in solidarity with people in the region, U.S. actions have exacerbated civilian harm and aggravated these societies' fragility. The experience of the Obama administration during the 2011 Arab uprisings shows the limits of lofty rhetoric¹⁷ without a reorientation of U.S. interests in the region.¹⁸ So long as U.S. policy focuses on establishing a top-down model of security and development, it will continue to undermine people's right to self-determination and the U.S. ability to play a constructive role for change.

Continued reform movements in the region,¹⁹ however, present an opportunity for the United States to reorient its policies to support the goals of people, not authoritarian governments. This would require an expansion of U.S. diplomatic engagement with nongovernmental actors and other members of the international community to facilitate negotiations between the people and their governments. The United States should use its various levers for influence, including diplomatic statements and accountability for the bilateral relationship, to push governments to meaningfully engage and create accountability for atrocities committed. Rather than seeking regime change, this would ensure the United States acts in solidarity with the people and in support of the values it always has claimed to support.

SOLIDARITY AS A POLICY METRIC

Solidarity provides a useful metric for policymakers to determine whether U.S. actions would undermine or support the desires of local populations. This metric would require policy makers to determine whether they have engaged a broad cross-section of society working for change outside the government, and conduct an analysis as to whether U.S. action, whatever its form, will not harm and instead support the desire of the public. This will not always mean that the United States takes the desired action some members of these societies will ask for – for example, helping to overthrow governments through the use of force – but it will ensure that any U.S. action centers the voices of those most affected by U.S. decisionmaking.

Self-determination

Supporting self-determination for all will require the United States to support other governments' decisions that fulfill the needs and desires of their own people. It will require the United States to listen more and dictate less in bilateral and multilateral relationships. By understanding that the aspirations of other people may not align with immediate U.S. priorities, upholding this principle supports democratization around the world. It is also an essential component of building safety for others by allowing people to determine how best to fulfill the human needs of their own societies. By focusing policy outcomes on upholding local communities' right to self-determination, the United States can help dismantle systems of oppression, such as white supremacy, economic exploitation, racism, patriarchy, and colonialism, that prevent economic and political inclusion.

UPHOLDING SELF-DETERMINATION IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Support for international development is essential to supporting self-determination for all. The United States must focus international development initiatives on prioritizing locally led initiatives that serve local needs. The current administrative burden placed upon recipients of U.S. development aid prevents small, local (often rural) partners from receiving grants – actors who often know the most about local development needs and are critical to building local institutional capacity. The United States should seek to eliminate this level of bureaucratic burden as much as possible by providing flexible funding for local community foundations.²⁰ Such foundations are able to take on the administrative and legal burden for local implementers and empower the local community

to identify local solutions for conflict mitigation, political reconciliation, and social and economic empowerment. With sufficient anti-corruption controls, this will help ensure that U.S. development assistance around the world addresses the needs of disproportionately marginalized populations, such as women and indigenous people, and allows these groups to lead the implementation of solutions.

UPHOLDING SELF-DETERMINATION FOR THE KOREAN PEOPLE

While Washington's rhetoric acknowledges people's right to self-determination, it is not necessarily upheld in practice. Washington, for example, has largely ignored South Korean President Moon Jae-in's efforts to seek peace on the Korean Peninsula. Moon is acting in South Korea's security interests, in recognition that a war, first and foremost, would harm the Korean people. The mass popular support for his efforts to achieve inter-Korean reconciliation only underscore the fact that Moon is acting in the interest of his own people. Yet Washington has resisted steps toward peace without North Korea's unilateral disarmament, and has expressed repeated concerns that Moon's diplomacy will harm U.S. security and play into North Korea's supposed goal of undermining the bilateral alliance.²¹

What this criticism misses, however, is that by failing to align U.S. interests with the popular will of the Korean people, the United States could be the one undermining its alliance with South Korea. To truly support the self-determination of the Korean people, U.S. policymakers should recognize instead that the South's approach to peace and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula could address the United States' security interests in restricting North Korea's nuclear program. Following South Korea's lead by putting peace and denuclearization on equal footing could strengthen the U.S. bilateral relationship and support the self-determination of the Korean people. By achieving a comprehensive peace deal that secures the eventual disarmament and increased economic development of North Korea, the U.S. also could help the North Korean people achieve better human rights and self-determination by facilitating the liberalization of North Korean society in the long term.

SELF-DETERMINATION AS A POLICY METRIC

The principle of self-determination can serve as a useful metric for foreign policy makers. By centering the desires of the people most affected by U.S. policy decisions, the United States can move to align its interests with the

popular will of other societies. In policy development, upholding self-determination will require U.S. policymakers to engage with broad cross-sections of local populations and analyze whether partner governments' actions uphold the desires of their people. It also will force an assessment as to whether a proposed U.S. policy will uphold or undermine people's right to determine their future. Policymakers also will need to determine how to uphold self-determination when issues arise outside of people's relationship with their national government, at the local, interstate, or multinational level. Doing so will prevent the United States from doing harm while also uplifting the fresh policy solutions developed by the people of other nations.

Equality

Ending economic, racial, and gender inequality is a security and moral imperative for the United States and the world. While the spread of international trade and market-based economies has contributed to technological innovation²² and the alleviation²³ of extreme poverty,²⁴ it also has helped to concentrate wealth in the hands of a global elite who have used tax havens, corporate loopholes, and corruption to hoard the world's financial resources, fueling further inequality and competition over limited resources. Mass inequality has helped exacerbate divisions between identity groups rooted in economic, gender, and racial inequality, creating competition rather than a united movement for change.

Authoritarian movements take advantage of these divisions to facilitate economic exploitation and kleptocratic corruption. Authoritarian systems of government profit off state industries at the expense of their own people, while imposing austerity policies (whether at their own behest or as a result of neoliberal economic policies

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required by the Bretton Woods institutions) that harm the most vulnerable and increase the divide between rich and poor – all in the name of economic development. To increase their own economic and political power, authoritarian leaders, multinational corporations, and other corrupt actors from Saudi Arabia to Russia to the United States have used shell corporations, tax havens, money laundering schemes, and corrupt dealings to secure their

interests, hoard financial wealth, and exploit workers. In the United States and around the world, this often has resulted in the loss of middle class jobs that once provided social mobility, and undermined investment in sustainable industries that could increase local communities' economic security. Meanwhile, the top 1 percent of the population controls half the world's wealth.²⁵

WORKING TOWARD EQUALITY BY REDUCING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

There must be a bold reformation of the international economic system to ensure the needs of all peoples – not just oligarchs and corporations – are met. While previous U.S. anti-corruption regulations have had global impact, more must be done to dismantle global oligarchy and close loopholes that protect the power of multinational corporations. The United States should require beneficial ownership reporting from American businesses and entities to help end the power of secret money in the U.S. financial system.²⁶ Passing beneficial ownership legislation, for example, would help ensure that the U.S. financial system is not used for illicit financial flows, and limit the use of shell companies to hide wealth or anonymously give endless amounts of money to undermine the influence of people in elections.

To help build economic equality, the United States should prioritize international economic policies that empower people, not corporations, by giving workers a fair playing field and enshrining the right to collective action. It also must end the undue power given to corporate interests to exploit other countries economically through investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS), which allows corporations to sue countries for profits in a corporate-run tribunal. Instead, the United States should give workers a seat at the table in trade negotiations, abolish the ISDS system, raise and protect safety and labor standards, and provide workers the right to organize collectively to ensure equal protection under the law.

PURSUING EQUALITY THROUGH DEVELOPMENT FINANCE

Working toward equality is also essential to addressing great-power competition. Pursuing equality through investments in sustainable development can counter exploitative strategies like China's Belt and Road initiative²⁷ that has facilitated Chinese influence around the world, and, in some instances, given China increased control over debtor nations.²⁸ This initiative is a debt trap in another form that prevents these countries from reinvesting in their own people, undermining the economic development of these nations in the long term. Despite

this reality, such loans are attractive in the face of options on offer, such as International Monetary Fund loans that often come with their own debt trap by imposing austerity spending on recipient nations to repay the loans.

Reinvigorating U.S. development finance through, for example, the newly established U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC) is essential to offering developing countries a viable, non-exploitative alternative.²⁹ With a \$60 billion budget, USIDFC holds much promise to offer transparent, U.S. financing for economic opportunity and growth in the private sector. It is imperative that USIDFC be implemented in such a way that balances its tripartite priorities of development, national security, and commercial viability. It can do so by prioritizing local impact and establishing fair and nondiscriminatory labor practices for local workers involved in USIDFC-financed projects. It also should coordinate heavily with USAID to ensure the projects it prioritizes are actual game changers for the local economy and working people, rather than just a boon to American commercial interests.

EQUALITY AS A POLICY METRIC

Equality is an essential metric for U.S. foreign policy. U.S. policymakers must assess whether a proposed policy will help lift up the most marginalized in society. Policymakers should emphasize policies grounded in fairness, nondiscrimination, and equal opportunity. Prioritizing diversity in U.S. national security staffing also can help uphold this principle by ensuring a variety of perspectives and experiences in the policymaking process. Ensuring social and economic inclusion in U.S. international development, trade, and financial policy will be essential to undermining mass inequality.

Justice

Instilling justice as a principle of U.S. foreign policy will mean elevating the protection of human rights as a core priority of U.S. engagement in the world. U.S. government institutions, the Pentagon in particular, have resisted accountability for their actions abroad, and the lack of congressional oversight since 9/11 has only furthered this trend. This must change if the United States is to be a credible actor for justice in the world. The United States must prioritize policies that prevent human suffering, hold perpetrators – including parts of the United States government and private military contractors – accountable for abuses, and ensure U.S. actions uphold international law and norms in order to help create a more inclusive and accountable world system.

Accountability for abuses affiliated with U.S. actions during the post-9/11 wars primarily has meant obfuscation. The Pentagon has claimed³⁰ far fewer civilian casualties³¹ in its air campaign in Iraq and Syria, parts of which have been called a “war of annihilation,”³² than that documented by nongovernmental organizations.³³ This is not a rare occurrence: The United States has vastly undercounted civilian casualties in the targeted killing program,³⁴ and deliberately ignored well-documented gross violations of human rights by U.S. partner forces in Yemen.³⁵ These failures of justice are an attempt by the U.S. military to shield itself and its partners from accountability. It also avoids a serious public discussion as to whether killing thousands of civilians forwards the security of Americans or other people.

HOLDING THE UNITED STATES AND ITS PARTNERS ACCOUNTABLE

Silence in the face of abuses – whether those of the United States or of others – in the name of national security only fuels insecurity and does nothing to keep Americans or other people around the world safe. The United States must change its relationship with accountability and instead seek to hold itself accountable to the very norms and laws it has sought to uphold. The first step is to end the Forever War that has produced widespread civilian harm, and to engage in truth commissions to publicly reconcile with the conduct of U.S. military activities, its abetting of partner abuses, and violations of American civil liberties since 9/11.

The United States also should start by adhering to international law in any military engagement or security cooperation, rather than making legal interpretations that undermine compliance to the Law of Armed

Conflict.³⁶ It also can help further the cause of justice by issuing transparent rules of engagement that expand on the civilian harm protections in the Obama-era presidential policy guidance.³⁷ It should enforce the human rights provisions of the Foreign Assistance Act and Arms Export Control Act and cut off security assistance to countries that engage in gross violations of human rights.³⁸ Vetting foreign military partners for abuses also must occur before extending security cooperation agreements or the transfer of military equipment, weapons, and other services.

While the conduct of foreign policy ultimately will require U.S. engagement with governments that do harm to their own and other people, that engagement must not create a blank check for impunity. The United States should never deny its own purported values and always make clear in words and in action that it supports human rights, accountable governance, and justice for all. In practice, this should not prevent diplomatic engagement with governments that repress their own people or commit human rights abuses. Instead, as was the case with Iran, the starting point may be first resolving a collective security concern, which can build a foundation for deeper engagement on human rights and governance reform in the future.

ESTABLISHING MULTILATERAL ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

In its most common parlance, accountability in U.S. foreign policy often equates to punitive airstrikes against non-allied perpetrators of human rights violations. Such actions – often taken by the President in circumvention of Congress’ Article I authority – are applauded by both sides of the aisle because the United States *did something* in the face of atrocities. Yet in reality, such airstrikes do little to create real accountability, and more often than not fuel more violence.³⁹ Punitive military action cannot take the place of diplomacy and actual accountability.

Rather than further militarizing human rights, the United States must shift its approach to help establish international accountability mechanisms to deter future human rights atrocities. The United States should ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, as its previous failure to do so undermined the power of the institution to bring justice. While international tribunals and universal jurisdiction remain viable tools, the United States should seek instead to instill accountability within the United Nations as part of the institution’s current reform effort. To prevent the U.N. Security Council from impeding collective action for justice, for example, the United States should support expanding the Council’s

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non- and permanent membership to include more members from the Global South,⁴⁰ and support adopting a code of conduct that ends the use of the Security Council veto for Council actions that would create accountability for acts of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.⁴¹

JUSTICE AS A POLICY METRIC

Justice is a critical metric for reforming U.S. engagement abroad. In policy development, it will require U.S. policymakers to critically assess past U.S. actions that have undermined accountability for human rights abuses. It will require the United States to hold itself accountable under international law if it seeks to hold others to the same standard. It will require for the United States to instill accountability into its bilateral military relationships and hold partners accountable for human rights abuses in every instance, not only when convenient. It will require the United States to speak out in the face of abuses even if it is the U.S. military or allied nations that commit them. Only by doing so can the United States help lead the reform of the international governance system to create true accountability mechanisms that deter future atrocities.

Conclusion

While this may appear to be a radical project requiring immutable resources, it is important to remember that the United States rose to the task following World War II and sought to make the world a better, safer place. This approach will require the U.S. government to hold itself to a higher standard than the pursuit of power. It also requires a whole-of-society approach to changing the United States' role in the world to ensure political momentum behind this reformation. The good news is that polling of the U.S. public supports this more restrained, constructive approach to world affairs⁴² and suggests support for policymakers who take bold action to re-center U.S. engagement on the well-being and security of all. If Washington seeks to reestablish the United States as a true force for good in the world, it would do well to heed the desires of the American people and people around the world for a more values-driven approach to U.S. foreign policy.

A U.S. GRAND STRATEGY FOR A VALUES-DRIVEN FOREIGN POLICY

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MILITARY INTERVENTION AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY

REBECCA FRIEDMAN LISSNER

As the Cold War reached its denouement, the George H. W. Bush administration sought to move “beyond containment” and toward a new strategic vision for the United States. In August 1990, shortly after Saddam Hussein’s Iraq invaded neighboring Kuwait, President Bush and his National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft went fishing off the coast of Kennebunkport, Maine. Since the Atlantic bluefish weren’t biting, the two statesmen spoke about grand strategy instead. From this “searching discussion” emerged an enticing organizing principle: the advent of a “new world order.”¹

Though inchoate in its nature and scope, this new world order sought to forestall interstate aggression and manage violent conflict through multilateral cooperation among great powers – in Bush’s words, “a world in which the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle.”² Precisely how this ambition would be achieved remained ill-defined – until the Gulf War placed the true character of the unipolar moment in stark relief. Militarily, U.S. forces outperformed all operational expectations;³ diplomatically, Washington assembled a coalition that shouldered the financial burden of the war;⁴ domestically, the U.S. public vigorously rallied around the flag.⁵ The war left no doubt that the United States would define and enforce the terms of the post-Cold War world – if necessary, through military interventions like the one that seemed to succeed brilliantly in the Gulf. While basking in the victorious glow of the largest military parade since World War II, then-Secretary of State James Baker recalled a recent aside from his counterpart at the Pentagon, Dick Cheney: “Baker, it doesn’t get any better than this.”⁶ In those heady days of 1991, neither man could have known the tragic depth of that insight.

“We’re 0 for a Lot”

Military interventions have defined America’s role in the world ever since, and with a rather dismal record of success. The United States used military force abroad more than 200 times since 1992.⁷ This is a staggeringly large number – all the more so in relative terms, as the entire Cold War saw only 46 instances of armed overseas deployments, not to mention a grand total of 86 over the entirety of the 19th century. While it is hardly shocking that the world’s sole superpower flexed its military muscle so freely, it is surprising that Washington has continued to do so amid disappointing outcomes, frequently at high cost. As Admiral Michael Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, succinctly put it:

“We’re 0 for a lot.”⁸ President Donald Trump was more acerbic: “Seven trillion dollars over a 17-year period, and we have nothing – nothing except death and destruction. It’s a horrible thing.”⁹ (The upper end of researchers’ estimates of the long-term costs of American interventions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria is closer to \$5.9 trillion.¹⁰)

The costs – in blood, in treasure, in national pride and prestige – exacted by recent wars have placed military interventions at the center of debates over the future of American grand strategy, and rightfully so. In the political arena, President Trump is hardly alone in judging the United States’ recent track record unacceptable.

The costs – in blood, in treasure, in national pride and prestige – exacted by recent wars have placed military interventions at the center of debates over the future of American grand strategy, and rightfully so.

On the other end of the partisan spectrum, Senator and Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren charges that America’s Middle Eastern misadventures “have not succeeded even on their own terms.”¹¹ Senator Bernie Sanders directly connected his critique of U.S. interventionism to his rejection of “benevolent global hegemony” as a desirable grand strategic option: “events of the past two decades – particularly the disastrous Iraq war and the instability and destruction it has brought to the region – have utterly discredited that vision.”¹² Democratic international affairs thinkers and former government officials echo the rallying cry to end America’s “forever wars.”¹³ Outside the beltway, longtime academic advocates of a more restrained grand strategy see a window of opportunity in this left-right alignment against Washington’s post-Cold War foreign policy excesses.¹⁴

But while it is clear that military interventions assumed an outsized role in American grand strategy over the course of the post-Cold War period – with political debates about foreign policy increasingly focused on these interventions’ costs – it is less clear where Washington goes from here. Learning the right lessons from recent history is vitally important, but even a careful forensic examination of past mistakes does not

provide a perfect guide to future policy. It is therefore necessary to go beyond an evaluation of specific intervention decisions and their consequences to examine the strategic environment that shaped them. Such an examination reveals three enabling factors that contributed to post-Cold War U.S. grand strategy's military overreach. First, the absence of great-power rivals created a low risk of both catastrophic escalation and pernicious counter-intervention by other powerful states; second, the United States' military-technological endowments created new opportunities for intervention – particularly intervention at a low human cost – where they had not existed before; and third, the American public was willing to tolerate foreign intervention so long as casualties and taxes remained at acceptably low levels. While these conditions surely did not guarantee success, they made the United States' post-Cold War tempo of military interventions possible and contained the consequences of failure.

Looking to the future, it is tempting to conclude that conspicuous failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, accompanied by the strategic exigencies of renewed great-power competition and the United States' shrinking military edge, will end the United States' interventionist streak. It is more likely, however, that the siren call of interventionism will endure, albeit at a diminished intensity. Neither political nor military constraints will wholly preclude opportunities for large-scale uses of force overseas, even as a more competitive geopolitical environment makes it substantially riskier. It is therefore the task of grand strategy to tame the interventionist temptation by bounding American global ambitions, clearly delineating U.S. interests, and elevating non-military tools in the realization of these ends.

A Grand Strategy Without Limits

The global balance of power determines the limits of any grand strategy. Some policymakers preferred an approach that uprooted Soviet power in Eastern Europe during the early Cold War, for example, but the costs and risks of such a “rollback” strategy made containment a preferable alternative.¹⁵ American grand strategy during the unipolar moment was unique in its comparative lack – and indeed rejection – of such limits. As the 1991 National Security Strategy recognized, “the United States remains the only state with truly global strength, reach and influence in every dimension.”¹⁶ The Pentagon's 1992 Defense Planning Guidance went further in articulating the strategic implications of primacy: “Our first objective is to prevent the reemergence of a new rival . . . that poses a threat on the order of that formerly posed by the Soviet Union.”¹⁷

Indeed, the United States' preeminent position afforded tremendous freedom of action and the American theory of security came to increasingly depend on the use of force as a means of addressing a wide range of security and humanitarian challenges.

The absence of great-power rivals fostered highly permissive conditions for American military intervention around the world. Although the Cold War grand strategy of containment had not provided definitive criteria for determining where the United States should use force, it did provide general guidelines: the need to “to present the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.”¹⁸ The post-Cold War world had no such touchpoints, beyond a vague yet all-encompassing commitment to advancing liberalism. The United States therefore came to pursue a grand strategy that expansively defined the range of national and international interests worthy of advancement via military force. The U.S. military intervened abroad to stem civil strife in Somalia, promote democracy in Haiti, stop ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo, preempt an illusory WMD program in Iraq, retaliate against the al Qaeda-harboring Taliban in Afghanistan, prevent a humanitarian emergency in Libya, defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and fight the scourge of terrorism around the world. Two of these early-2000s interventions, in Iraq and Afghanistan, began with the aforementioned intent but quickly morphed into nation-building efforts and prolonged counterinsurgency campaigns. Many of these interventions, particularly those undertaken in the 1990s, were “wars of choice”; others, like Afghanistan, began as “wars of necessity” that redressed legitimate security risks, but came to suffer from excessive mission creep.¹⁹

Even as the costs of these interventions – particularly the post-9/11 interventions – were massive, the national security risks were remarkably low. The geopolitical slack of the post-Cold War era allowed the United States to engage in global military interventions with little concern that doing so might provoke catastrophic escalation. This too was a marked departure from earlier historical periods defined by global spheres of influence, including the Cold War. President Harry Truman intervened in the Korean War knowing it might lead to a direct confrontation with Russia; though the prospect of World War III did not deter him, it rendered the intervention extremely high-stakes and required a warfighting strategy designed to avoid inciting Russian counter-intervention. In other instances, like the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the risk of general war was too great to justify any American military intervention at all.

The United States no longer will have the luxury of expending its national security resources on long and costly wars of choice without forcing dangerous trade-offs.

By contrast, the post-Cold War world did not feature a zero-sum global competition. Unipolarity meant that the balance of power did not hinge on the control or political organization of small states. As such, there was no rival power bent on delivering setbacks to the United States at every opportunity. Regional meddlers like Iran and Pakistan nevertheless inflicted significant costs on American operations in Iraq and Afghanistan – but the assistance and safe havens they provided were limited, if lethal. The absence of spheres of influence also meant that the United States could intervene in erstwhile Soviet client states like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Bosnia without running afoul of a great-power patron. In a sense, Kosovo was the exception that proved the rule: Despite Russia's long-standing interests in the Balkans, Moscow's stand at the Pristina airport was the closest NATO forces came to directly confronting Russia, and the face-off ended with agreement on a joint peacekeeping operation (albeit with Russian troops operating under their own command). Aside from this incident, the notion that a military intervention could escalate into a conflict that would directly threaten the American homeland was nearly unthinkable.

Looking to the future role of military interventions in U.S. grand strategy, similarly permissive conditions are unlikely to persist. Readers have no doubt heard much about the return to great-power competition. Indeed, Washington now faces a rising and revisionist China as well as a declining but still-formidable and revanchist Russia; both militaries have undertaken ambitious modernization programs that will degrade the United States' ability to operate in the Western Pacific and the Baltics over the coming decade. Meanwhile, North Korea is now armed with nuclear weapons and ICBMs likely capable of reaching the continental United States. This strategic outlook – combined with the prospect of significant fiscal tightening at home – suggests the United States no longer will have the luxury of expending its national security resources on long and costly wars of choice without forcing dangerous trade-offs.

Great-power rivalry does not necessarily augur an end to the era of American military intervention, however, and much will depend on how Washington defines its grand strategic objectives for the burgeoning competitions. Shifting regional military balances foreshadow

a growing risk that the United States could face intervention decisions that directly implicate core U.S. interests in Europe and Asia: a Taiwan contingency, Baltic incursion, or North Korean provocation against South Korea, for

example. In reacting to any such contingency, the United States would have to contemplate whether and how to overcome unfavorable geography, acute escalation risks, and the adversary's likely first-mover advantage – a situation that differs profoundly from U.S.-initiated post-Cold War interventions, all of which afforded Washington significant discretion in defining when, where, and how to intervene.

Even beyond areas proximate to American allies or vital to the United States' command of the commons, U.S. interventions may become increasingly costly and contested. Russia's involvement in Syria – with its determination to frustrate American attempts to depose Syrian President Bashar al Assad, as well as the attendant risk of a direct clash between U.S. and Russian forces – therefore could be a leading indicator of what is to come. Moreover, as a grand strategic matter, the Vietnam War's history vividly demonstrates that high-stakes geopolitical competition is not sufficient to preclude American intervention on the strategic periphery – and in fact may incentivize it. If U.S. grand strategy comes to define the competition with China – or a Russia-China “axis of authoritarians” – as global and zero-sum in nature, Washington will be pulled toward interventions that aim to prevent rival powers from accruing political, military, and/or economic influence, even in locations of lesser geostrategic significance.

“The United States Can Do Anything, Just Not Everything”

If victory in the Cold War left the United States without clear grand strategic purpose, it also left the United States exceptionally well armed. When the Cold War ended, the U.S. military had a nuclear arsenal numbering more than 20,000 warheads,²⁰ nearly 2 million troops,²¹ upwards of 500 Navy ships,²² and a cutting-edge suite of military technologies developed to fight the Soviet Union. The First Gulf War placed this preponderance of power in stark relief with its surprisingly quick rout of Saddam Hussein's “million-man army” with historically low American casualties.²³ The war also forestalled deeper defense cuts and settled the argument in favor of a robust regional contingency strategy as

the basis for defense planning.²⁴ Consequently, even after harvesting a “peace dividend” through defense downsizing over the course of the 1990s, the United States remained uniquely capable of global power projection and at the forefront of an apparent technological revolution in military affairs.²⁵ As one mid-1990s analysis put it, “The United States can do anything, just not everything.”²⁶

Indeed, the United States had the military capabilities to intervene nearly anywhere at any time; when confronting a crisis overseas, military force became the central instrument of American grand strategy. Repeatedly, the U.S. military achieved decisive effects at remarkably low American casualties using a combination of legacy sea and air transportation assets along with advanced military technologies like stealth, precision-guided munitions (PGMs), satellite communications, and unmanned systems.²⁷ The 1998

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Kosovo intervention represented the apotheosis of this trend: The B-2 bomber made its combat debut, PGMs featured prominently, and unarmed UAVs assumed an important combat support role for the first time in a U.S.-led air campaign that compelled Serbian leaders to accede to NATO’s terms.²⁸ New technologies also enabled an expansion of the role for Special Operations forces.²⁹ In Afghanistan, American airpower supported a small cadre of approximately 350 special operations forces, 100 CIA paramilitary units, and their Afghan partners to quickly overthrow the Taliban in 2001 – a moment of success that proved fleeting but also seems to have been influential on the use of special forces and advanced technology to unseat Saddam Hussein in 2003 (another transitory victory).³⁰ A U.S.-led coalition principally used air power in Libya to overthrow Muammar Qaddafi’s regime, only to find its early achievements in civilian protection overshadowed by the country’s subsequent disintegration into civil war.³¹ Indeed, the spectacular achievement of military objectives alongside unsatisfactory political results has been a hallmark of post-Cold War interventions.³²

The United States will retain a formidable suite of power projection, precision strike, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities into the 2020s, in addition to its global network of allies, partners, and bases.³³ These capabilities will continue to provide policymakers in Washington an unparalleled menu of options for military intervention around the world – but its margin of advantage has diminished from the post-Cold War peak, making future interventions costlier. Particularly in the Western Pacific and on NATO’s eastern flank, the United States is becoming more constrained due to advancements in Chinese and Russian anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities – a development that will significantly complicate future intervention decisions. Keenly aware of its status as a potential target of American intervention, North Korea has amassed artillery along the South Korean border, acquired nuclear weapons, and tested advanced missiles at various ranges. Iran, for similar reasons, has pursued an asymmetric naval strategy, developed missiles for cost-imposing A2/AD, and maintains a regional network of proxy forces.³⁴

Even when matched against far less capable state or non-state actors, the U.S. military now has to contend with precision weapons, unmanned systems, and dense information environments. Indeed, the military innovations demonstrated so spectacularly in the Gulf War have diffused and will continue to do so. As Elliot Cohen writes, “Weapons of precision now pervade the battlefield, including in the hands of guerrillas, and air and space are now available to all combatants in the form of satellite-aided navigation systems (e.g., GPS), or commercially available overhead imagery.”³⁵ While the American military can still do almost anything, its interventions will be riskier, costlier, and demand greater trade-offs than they did in the post-Cold War environment. Military interventions must necessarily assume a lesser role in American grand strategy as a result.

Permissive Politics

Beyond its kinetic effects, American military effectiveness enabled a high tempo of foreign military interventions with remarkable public forbearance, attenuating the domestic-political costs of an interventionist grand strategy. Although casualties are not the only means by which the American public determines its approval of a military intervention, high fatalities certainly make sustained popular support more challenging.³⁶ As such, the United States’ ability to use

military technologies that diminished the human costs of war likely created politically permissive conditions for policymakers in the post-Cold War era. Yet even in Afghanistan, the nation's longest-ever war, significant casualties have not prompted public backlash due in part to two post-Vietnam War changes: the narrowly distributed burden of service in an all-volunteer military and the end of war taxes.³⁷

Of course, the mere fact that Americans are not protesting the Afghanistan War in 1968 proportions hardly implies that military interventions are politically neutral. Every post-Cold War president has won the White House by promising to curb foreign adventurism: Clinton promised a laser focus on the economy, Bush disavowed nation building, Obama made opposition to the Iraq War his signature issue, and Trump denounced democracy promotion via force. Yet, revealingly, each president continued to rely on military intervention to advance his international objectives, most notably: Clinton with humanitarian interventions in Somalia, Haiti, Iraq, and the Balkans; Bush through the war on terror and specifically in Afghanistan and Iraq; Obama by surging in Afghanistan and initiating a war in Libya; and Trump by increasing American involvement in Afghanistan and Syria, while repeatedly threatening to use force against North Korea and Venezuela and expanding strikes in Africa. Anti-interventionism may be a winning political argument underpinned

If future interventions implicate core strategic interests, like the defense of treaty allies, the public may be willing to bear far higher costs with diminished political repercussions.

by considerable strategic merits – but faced with specific intervention decisions, countervailing forces, such as the “rally ’round the flag” effect, public deference to elite cues, and media boosterism, seem to render public skepticism a weaker and more ambiguous constraint on policymakers than commonly assumed.

As the United States moves into the “post-post-Cold War” period, many of these same conditions are likely to hold, giving policymakers significant political leeway in defining the role of military

interventions in future American grand strategy. This flexibility is not immutable, however, and several policy or political shifts could alter the debate significantly. Political science research indicates that the American public's casualty tolerance depends on its assessment of a war's bearing on the national interest, as well as its likelihood of success.³⁸ If future interventions implicate core strategic interests, like the defense of treaty allies, the public may be willing to bear far higher costs with diminished political repercussions. Indeed, a majority of Americans express their support for the use of U.S. troops to repel a North Korean invasion of South Korea or Japan, as well as a Russian invasion of a NATO ally (though the numbers are lower for contingencies involving Chinese aggression against Taiwan or Japan).³⁹ When assessing the importance and likelihood of success of military interventions, however, the public does not reach their conclusions independently; rather, as with many other controversial foreign policy issues, they rely on cues from like-minded elites.⁴⁰

Intensifying partisan polarization may thus create new hurdles to foreign military interventions. Public opinion about the use of force is already highly polarized: In the case of the 2003 Iraq War, for example, the current partisan divide in assessments of the war's wisdom roughly mirrors the gap between Democrats and Republicans' support for the decision to use force in March 2003.⁴¹ If the partisan gap continues to widen among both elites and the mass public, presidents may find it even more difficult to garner bipartisan support for military intervention decisions.⁴² Acting without broad-based public or congressional support exposes the president politically to the costs of failure and may disincentivize risky intervention decisions. Polarization also increases the likelihood that military interventions will come under fire from opponents in Congress, as exemplified by recent efforts to end American involvement in the Yemeni civil war by using legislation to tie the U.S. military's hands.

Finally, throughout the post-Cold War period, Americans bore the financial costs of war indirectly: Rather than paying war taxes, the government shunted the costs of intervention onto the federal deficit.⁴³ As the United States' fiscal crisis reaches increasingly dangerous proportions,⁴⁴ the politics of war financing could change dramatically – whether through a return to direct taxation, an end to the United States' ability to fund its wars through borrowing, or dramatic defense spending cuts.⁴⁵

The Way Forward

Throughout the post-Cold War period, military interventions served as crucibles for American grand strategy. Although the pillars of liberal internationalism were well defined – shaping an international order conducive to domestic peace and prosperity, the spread of liberal politics and markets, and institutionalized international cooperation – its universalizing ambitions dictated few natural boundaries. Military interventions thus compelled policymakers to define the limits of the national interest through decisions about where, when, and how to use military force abroad.⁴⁶ Once underway, some military interventions – particularly the 2003 Iraq War – created their own gravitational fields, consuming time, attention, and resources in vast quantities. The excesses of liberal internationalism’s post-Cold War implementation mars the record of a grand strategy that also delivered meaningful successes.⁴⁷ As Hal Brands argues, “for all its travails, American strategy has played a central role in making the post-Cold War international system more stable, more liberal, and more favorable to U.S. interests and ideals than it would otherwise have been – and certainly in bringing about a more benign international environment than many expert observers expected when the post-Cold War period began.”⁴⁸

In charting the way forward, the United States needs a more focused grand strategy that can advance American interests in a more constrained geopolitical future. Central to this task will be a diminished role for discretionary military interventions in U.S. grand strategy, even as this strategy also must define the vital interests that

The United States needs a more focused grand strategy that can advance American interests in a more constrained geopolitical future.

the nation should prepare to defend in an increasingly contested security environment. Together, the reemergence of great power competitors, erosion of the United States’ margin of conventional military advantage, and intensification of domestic-political pressure suggest a number of guidelines:

First, the United States should end its “forever wars.” A negotiated settlement via ongoing dialogue with the Taliban in Afghanistan is the most feasible way to end America’s longest war. Although ham-handed in its execution, President Trump’s instinct to begin drawing

down the U.S. presence in Syria gestures in the right direction. So too does the president’s decision to limit the number of American troops in Africa.⁴⁹ While extrication from Afghanistan, Syria, and Africa need not imply a complete abandonment of the United States’ counterterrorism efforts, it does require a sharply curtailed mission. Congress has a role to play here as well, including by initiating a national debate about the appropriate use of military power in an evolving security environment. A repeal of the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force against Iraq and replacement of the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force against the September 11 attackers could help achieve the requisite strategic recalibration.⁵⁰

Second, to guide strategic planning, the United States needs a clearer conception of its own national interests than has prevailed in the post-Cold War era. Only a lucid definition of interests can delineate between wars of necessity and wars of choice. Moreover, in a limited war – whether with a near-peer competitor or a lesser power – sharply defined objectives are necessary to bring a conflict to its conclusion under conditions short of all-out Clausewitzian victory.⁵¹ Even in ongoing counterterrorism efforts, clarity of purpose can help set attainable objectives, determine acceptable costs, and avoid the mission creep that threatens to make the war on terror truly endless.

Third, U.S. grand strategy must focus on great-power rivalry with China and Russia. The demands of these competitions should focus strategists’ minds on the greatest national security challenges, while undermining the case for using resources to intervene in substate

conflicts, conduct nation-building operations, and/or prosecute armed regime change. A serious and well-resourced conflict prevention strategy spearheaded by a revitalized State Department can help preclude intra- or interstate violence that threatens the United

States and its allies and partners – a more cost-effective alternative to waiting until intervention is required.⁵² Far from obviating the possibility of military intervention, however, a return to great-power politics renders it more acute. The United States must plan to deter a Chinese or Russian move on American allies in Asia and Europe, as well as prepare for every phase of a conflict – to include war termination and postwar counterinsurgency and stability operations – should it occur.⁵³

Fourth, Washington should prepare for a future in which interventions are no longer military in the

conventional sense.⁵⁴ Particularly as geopolitical dynamics make traditional military interventions costlier and riskier, the United States must craft a grand strategy that relies on a wider array of tools. Given the United States' continued financial primacy, economic coercion is likely to remain chief among non-military tools, but Washington also could stand to regain its competency in what George Kennan called "political warfare."⁵⁵ Diplomacy, foreign aid, and international law will prove essential as well. To be effective, American grand strategy must marshal its diverse tools but also coordinate them, both within the U.S. government's sprawling interagency and alongside allies.⁵⁶ Moreover, for as long as the United States retains an overmatch in conventional military capabilities, it should expect persistent subconventional challenges that hover carefully below traditional conflict thresholds. To avoid unnecessary escalation, the United States should be ready to respond symmetrically in this space. The United States should employ conventional force only when interests are sufficiently vital *and* when military power is the most effective means.⁵⁷

Finally, strategists should be wary of new forms of military intervention that appear to lower costs and risks. Autonomous systems and cyberweapons create new opportunities for intervention without risking American lives; the absence of "boots on the ground" also enhances presidential war powers by evading oversight by Congress and the public.⁵⁸ To the extent that the United States maintains its advantages in these new forms of warfighting, the temptation to utilize these tools will only increase. But if there is one resounding lesson of the post-Cold War period, it is: Just because the United States *can* do something, does not mean that the United States *should* do something.

After the end of the Cold War and in the nearly three decades since, a permissive domestic and international environment afforded politicians and policymakers a significant margin for error. Grand strategy was frequently reactive and emergent; the purpose of American power was not sharply defined; and the United States' record of military misadventures reflects these shortcomings. Today and into the future, there will be no such strategic slack. The United States needs a lucid grand strategy to guide its role in the world and – critically – to discipline the application of America's vast military power so that it remains tightly tethered to the national interest.

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DOES AMERICA NEED A FOREIGN POLICY?

JEREMY SHAPIRO

It is weird to be America. Despite the constant patter about globalization, the United States remains the most self-sufficient, secure, and independent country on earth. It has many problems, of course, but they are distinctly first world problems. It retains from most any perspective – geographic, economic, military, and even demographic – an unrivaled capacity to ignore the rest of the world.¹ Its population, by and large, is absorbed with more pressing domestic issues and rarely expresses much collective interest in the world beyond North America. Foreign policy issues, even sometimes America’s own wars, do not figure prominently in U.S. elections. America does not really need much foreign policy.

But of course, America has a lot of foreign policy. And it is not just focused on issues like immigration, homeland security, and trade that push up against America’s borders. To the contrary, the United States is a global power like no other. It has military forces in more than 150 countries around the world and a web of alliances and partnerships that covers every region on the planet.² Every day, its navies police bodies of waters that are thousands of miles from its shores; every week, its air forces bomb enemies that have never seen America; every decade, its military overthrows governments of countries that most of its population could not identify on a map.³

America is at once the country that needs a foreign policy the least and yet has it the most. We are so used to this paradox that we rarely question why it is the case. The paradox means that while U.S. foreign policy is not hard to explain from a historical perspective, it is hard to

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justify based on first principles – or to the voters. In other words, U.S. foreign policy in recent decades has been a luxury, not a necessity. In previous eras, it was a luxury the United States could afford – a powerful country that could, often did. But the return of geopolitical competition, the emergence of new powers, and pressing issues at home mean that it is not clear the situation can continue.

If the last few presidential elections are any guide, the American people are asking for less foreign policy – or at least for a foreign policy that is more rooted in their daily concerns. If America is going to continue to have a foreign policy, it will need one that responds to those demands. Formulating it will represent a challenge for

America’s foreign policy practitioners, what President Barack Obama’s team derisively referred to as the blob.⁴ Over the decades of America’s global presence, those practitioners progressively have embraced an ever-larger vision of U.S. national interest. That vision now encompasses almost every important global security issue in every region of the world. But it has largely left America behind.

Why America Has a Foreign Policy

From a historical perspective, it is not hard to explain why America has such an expansive foreign policy. For many U.S. policymakers, the main lesson of the first half of the 20th century was that the United States could just not sit back in its hemisphere and allow threats to gather in Europe or Asia. The post-World War I experience had demonstrated that deep American involvement in the world was necessary for stability. Without an American presence in the key strategic regions of the world, the nations of Europe and Asia inevitably would go to war yet again. To prevent that instability from washing up on American shores, the United States ultimately would need to get involved yet again. It was far cheaper, in both blood and treasure, to maintain a large presence in the world and prevent the next war than it was to fight it.

This argument never took deep root within the public. Even in 1945, most Americans wanted, as Averell Harriman put it, “to settle all our difficulties with Russia and then go to the movies and drink Coke.”⁵ It took the outbreak of the Korean War, and the sense of threat to the United States itself from the Soviet Union and from communism, to inspire in the American public an interest a willingness to support the tens of thousands of military casualties and large expenditures (nearly \$20 trillion in 2019 dollars) of the long Cold War.⁶ During the early Cold War, U.S. policymakers did manage to create a domestic consensus in favor of U.S. leadership of the free world. But throughout, they had to maintain a precarious balance between a public that often questioned the domestic utility of American foreign policy and the demands on the treasury and the military that global leadership entailed.

But then the Cold War ended in 1991 and the Soviet threat disappeared. Many predicted that without the threat of the Soviet Union, the United States would return home and once again concentrating on drinking, if not Coke, then perhaps juice smoothies.⁷ But in fact, the opposite happened. Under both Democratic and

Republican presidents, the United States explicitly adopted a strategy of global leadership. It not only maintained its Cold War alliances in Europe and Asia, it expanded its reach and fought wars in Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East, and it involved itself in practically every global security problem from the Western Sahara to the South China Sea.

Again, this historical anomaly is not hard to explain in retrospect. It is an iron law of democratic politics that any vast spending program, no matter its origin or purpose, will spawn powerful interests that will forcefully support its continuation. Over the course of the long Cold War, the United States naturally had built up an enormous military, industrial, and intellectual complex to support and run its global foreign policy.

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President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his 1960 farewell address had warned of a military-industrial complex that would seek to lock the United States into ever higher military spending. But what emerged from the Cold War was more than that. It was a self-replicating class of powerful institutions and people whose education, outlook, and financial interests all told them that America's continued global leadership was necessary both for global stability and American security. This class never constituted a cabal, trying to distort U.S. policy for their advantage. To the contrary, in my experience both inside and outside of government, they are patriots who genuinely believe in the virtues of America's global role.

Nonetheless, over time, interests tend to form identities – you tend to believe something if your next meal (or your kid's college education) depends on it. The U.S. foreign policy elites' very identity tied them to the continuation of an approach that supported their interests as a class: an activist foreign policy of American global leadership. Dissenters were essentially apostates, banned from the church of government or even condemned to the hell of academia.

Leadership now has become central to the identity of most foreign policymakers. For example, a genuine debate raged within the U.S. government over whether to intervene in Libya in 2011. But when the British and

French declared that they would launch a military operation even without the United States, suddenly it became a leadership issue and the debate fundamentally shifted. Key U.S. officials believed that without the United States, a European intervention surely would fail, and the United States would have to pick up the pieces. So the United States had better lead from the start. They generally failed to note that the America's own track record on such interventions did not exactly inspire confidence.

Crucially, in the 1990s, this class interest intersected with a time of prosperity and enormous U.S. military superiority, the so-called unipolar moment.⁸ A booming economy meant that fiscal pressures, while still important, were much less than they might have been. After the exhilarating experience of easy military victory in the First Persian Gulf War of 1991, America's demonstrated military and technological superiority seemed to imply that that it could achieve almost anything at relatively little cost in lives and treasure. A distracted public could afford to allow the powerful foreign policy elite to maintain U.S. global leadership as a luxurious hobby and a source of patriotic pride.

Of course, this policy was not without its controversies and setbacks. “The policy elite needs something to do and enjoys traveling and global leadership” is not a winning slogan for a foreign policy program, even in times of plenty. U.S. foreign policy thinkers recognized that without the Soviet Union to focus minds, they needed a new intellectual framework to justify an expansive foreign policy framework. Over the last 25 years, there were many such efforts from Washington think tanks and from within the U.S. government. They ranged from President Bill Clinton's strategy of enlargement⁹ to President George W. Bush's vision of a democratic transformation of the Middle East.¹⁰

Such “grand strategies” differed on important details when it came to how to achieve U.S. geopolitical goals. They stirred many great debates on the importance of working with allies, on the promise and pitfalls of international institutions, and on the uses and abuses of military force. But they all agreed on a central point: The United States needed to maintain a policy of global leadership and worldwide presence. It needed, in short, a lot of foreign policy.

For such an expansive policy to justify itself, it needed to demonstrate a threat to U.S. national security. In a country as secure as the United States in the 1990s, this proved slightly difficult. The key has long been to recognize that in an interdependent world, everything ultimately is connected to everything else. It is always possible therefore to draw a logical, albeit

hypothetical, connection between any given foreign problem and a disastrous outcome for U.S. national security or prosperity.

For example, Balkans instability in the 1990s threatened to “spill over” into other countries, upsetting political and economic stability throughout Europe, with eventual impacts within the United States. The United States must intervene to stop it. A failure to support the NATO aspirations of Eastern Europe would condemn that part of the world to chronic instability, eventually requiring U.S. intervention. The United States must expand its alliance commitments. An invasion of a faraway country by a neighboring dictator may inspire bullies elsewhere to adopt the same tactics, thus eventually threatening the United States, so America must intervene to stop him. Because everything is connected to everything else, anything can logically become an American foreign policy problem.

The terrorism problem that emerged as the pre-eminent organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy after the September 11 attacks fits easily into this framework. Those attacks provided compelling, televised evidence that the world still could affect the United States in the most direct and horrible ways. The idea that a cell of underfunded zealots in caves in long-forgotten Afghanistan could wreak such

The U.S. foreign policy elites’ very identity tied them to the continuation of an approach that supported their interests as a class: an activist foreign policy of American global leadership.

damage clearly demonstrated the everything was indeed connected to everything else. The addition of weapons of mass destruction to the scenarios only enhanced this sentiment.

The U.S. foreign policy community jumped at the opportunity to fit the terrorism problem into a leadership framework. The attack, in this view, demonstrated that maintaining U.S. security and leadership therefore required intervening everywhere against the very possibility of terrorism – the global war on terror. As President Bush put it, “If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.”¹¹ The Obama administration that followed never fundamentally challenged this approach.

Terrorism, especially in its more expansive definitions, is a technique that exists pretty much everywhere. The logical linkage of terrorism anywhere to U.S. national

security at home provides a ready justification for U.S. intervention everywhere from Somalia to Yemen to the Philippines. And because terrorism is deeply rooted in social conditions, such missions tend to expand to the reform of entire societies.

Even in a time of great-power peace, this logic justified an enormous expansion of U.S. foreign policy into the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, including two long wars, interventions in many other conflicts, drone campaigns and special forces raids in countries as diverse as Pakistan, Somalia, and Niger, plus training programs and military assistance to dozens of countries.

Why U.S. Foreign Policy is Luxurious

The problem with the leadership approach is not that it lacks logic. The problem is that it is luxurious. It is a foreign policy for a country that, at least until recently, so far exceeded its rivals in wealth and security that it could afford to let foreign policy become the plaything of domestic elites and defense industrial interests.

To understand why U.S. foreign policy is luxurious, it is helpful to understand how a less weird country might form its foreign policy. In a more insecure, resource-constrained environment, the strategy process would look quite different. One would not start by looking around the world and searching for threats that, through some long chain of causation, eventually might affect one’s national security. A few threats would seem self-evidently more immediate, and you would allocate scarce resources to those problems first, and probably also last. More distant threats might pose some risk, but you would decide that you can and must accept that level of risk.

Armenia, for example, is not focused on the civil war in Syria; it is worried about the Azerbaijani armies on its borders. One can make a good case about how civil war in Syria someday might negatively affect Armenia. It would be a better case than for the United States – Armenia is, after all, much closer to Syria than is the United States. But Armenia is a poor country with more urgent priorities. Both its leaders and its public are focused on the Azerbaijani problem. It does not have the luxury of devoting much time or resources to the problem of the Syrian Civil War, even if in an ideal world, far-thinking Armenian strategists might like to.

Of course, America is not Armenia—it is a global power with responsibilities and interests around the world. But it ended up that way precisely because it does not have

Armenia's immediate problems and resource constraints. Most foreign policy strategies, by necessity rather than choice, assume limited resources and focus on clear, immediate problems.

For example, a more constrained country would have looked at the problem of terrorism after 9/11 as one that had to be managed through a homeland security approach rather than through eradicating the problem of terrorism everywhere. Interestingly, even as the U.S. war on terror has notably failed to eradicate or even to slow the growth of terrorism abroad, U.S. homeland security policy has effectively managed the problem of foreign terrorism in the United States.¹² As Peter Bergen and David Sterman note, "since 9/11, no foreign terrorist group has successfully conducted a deadly attack in the United States."¹³ The war on terror was apparently a luxury, but it continues to justify large swaths of U.S. foreign policy.

In general, U.S. foreign policy strategy, lacking direct threats or severe constraints, can devote vast resources to a wide array of problems – terrorism, nuclear weapons, Iran, North Korea – without much sense of prioritization or limits. It does so in the name of leadership and on the luxurious logic that even small, distant threats should be addressed.

Another way to understand that U.S. foreign policy is luxurious is by observing the public's approach to it. Efforts to understand the public's view on foreign policy sensibly tend to ask people how they feel about specific foreign policy problems, say the war in Iraq, or about larger questions such as America's role in the world. They tend to find a public that broadly supports an internationalist posture and even a leadership approach.¹⁴ But more deeply they find a public that does know much about foreign affairs and doesn't have deeply held positions on most foreign policy issues. A public that has better things to worry about has quite rationally outsourced foreign policy to elites, providing fairly little feedback or guidance.¹⁵

Indeed, a closer look shows that the public's foreign policy views are usually derivative of their views on domestic politics. For example, Republican voters long have been considered particularly hawkish on Russia. Such an attitude seemed well rooted in the experience of the Cold War and the hard-line identity of the Republican Party. But when President Donald Trump began making the case that perhaps Russia wasn't so bad, the attitudes of many Republican voters on Russia shifted quite suddenly and starkly.¹⁶ Similarly, Democratic voters during the Obama years overwhelmingly supported U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Now that

Trump is pushing that same policy, a majority now favor staying the course.¹⁷ Overall, as a recent Gallup poll on foreign policy concluded, "the responses to almost every question [on foreign policy] we ask Americans seem to be divided by partisanship."¹⁸

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Such partisanship on foreign policy is a sign of luxury. People who live in countries with immediate threats do not generally allow themselves the luxury of shifting their views on key foreign policy questions. Armenia has raucous domestic politics, but a very firm and invariable consensus on the Azerbaijani threat. They have maintained that consistent policy because they have few other options.

U.S. threats are more imagined, or at least more distant. Hiding behind their oceans and their nuclear weapons, American voters can change their minds and new presidential administrations can shift policies dramatically. U.S. foreign policy shows enormous variability on specific supposedly high-priority issues. The United States can invade Iraq, and then withdraw from it, and then invade it again. It can decide not to intervene in Syria, then intervene there.¹⁹ It can consider war with Russia over Georgia, then reset relations with Russia, then sanction it over Ukraine. Such inconsistency is a luxury that few other countries can afford.

Of course, luxuries are not in and of themselves a bad idea. Whether that coveted \$48.5 million diamond-encrusted iPhone is a reasonable indulgence or a ruinous extravagance depends entirely on how much money you have. The United States clearly has had a luxurious foreign policy for the last 30 years, but it largely has been a luxury the United States could afford.

U.S. foreign policy in recent decades has careened from failure to failure, most prominently in Iraq and Afghanistan. But despite the vast sums spent, the enormous human and material damage wrought on distant battlefields, and the tragic deaths of thousands of U.S. soldiers, the country as a whole has not felt that

failure. The United States has not become noticeably less secure, U.S. wars have not bankrupted the treasury, and U.S. domestic politics are not consumed by foreign policy issues. The problem, it seems, with being rich is that you can lose a lot of money without really noticing.

The question now is not whether U.S. foreign policy is luxurious, but whether the country can still afford a diamond-encrusted policy.

What Foreign Policy Can the United States Afford Today?

As U.S. foreign policy elites have distracted themselves with U.S. global leadership, the world has changed both at home and abroad. Two interconnected developments in recent years imply that a policy of global leadership no longer may be affordable.

The first is the rise of new powers and the return of geopolitical competition. The presence of these new, often assertive powers means that, even as America continues to prosper, it is less powerful. Power, after all, is a relative concept – if someone else has more of it, you necessarily have less.

The increasing power, or at least assertiveness, of these countries, particularly China and Russia, but also emerging powers such as Turkey, Brazil, and India, pose increasing problems for the United States around the world. They limit U.S. options in Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and the Pacific Ocean and even at times meddle in U.S. domestic affairs. Maintaining leadership in the face of their multidimensional challenge would require enormous new resources. So, even though U.S. overseas commitments have not increased in recent years and U.S. defense spending has gone up, increased competition means that many U.S. analysts²⁰ and policymakers²¹ believe that U.S. foreign policy is dramatically underfunded.

Of course, the United States retains enormous strengths. The new powers still do not directly threaten the United States, and U.S. defense spending, about 3.5 percent of GDP, remains modest by historical standards. Many believe²² that not only can the United States continue to afford a strategy of leadership, but that the new challenges from illiberal or authoritarian states²³ imply that the United States is now entering yet another global struggle that it must win to remain free at home.

Still, it is clear this task is much more daunting than it has been in recent decades. It also seems that in a more constrained and competitive environment, a second factor is coming into play. The public may no

longer provide a permissive domestic condition for a foreign policy of leadership without a more direct relationship to American domestic concerns. As noted, public opinion polls still show support for internationalist policies. But listening to the emerging²⁴ plans²⁵ of the presidential candidates in 2020, it also is clear that they see a public demand for a foreign policy that is more rooted in domestic concerns – worries about trade, immigration, and domestic inequality – than about distant wars or the rise of China.

Moreover, the current candidates no doubt feel much less constrained by the foreign policy establishment than in the past. In previous elections, candidates generally assumed that they needed the support of some segment of that establishment to show that their foreign policy wasn't crazy and that they could be trusted with the nuclear button. That still gave candidates a certain menu of choices, but it meant that broadly they had to support American leadership or

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the think tanks, and therefore the media, would label them isolationist or even dangerous. Throughout his campaigns and his presidency, Obama worried a great deal about what the Washington elite thought of his foreign policy, making great effort to reach out to them and placate them even if he often deplored their views.

But in 2016, candidate Trump simply ignored the foreign policy establishment, expressing no interest in their support. The Republican segment of that elite rose in protest against their own candidate and actively campaigned against him, specifically targeting his fitness to be commander-in-chief.²⁶ But their efforts had no effect on either the primary or general election campaigns. Trump won without them and has increasingly governed without them. The experience demonstrates that whatever political power the foreign policy elite ever had, it is now gone. For better or for worse, the current crop of candidates is free to select from a much wider menu of foreign policy options.

How to Create a U.S. Foreign Policy that Protects

Selecting from that broader menu is not easy. If the goal remains to retain global leadership or to go out into the world and strangle every potential problem in its cradle, America's task appears daunting indeed. It would require summoning a sense of national purpose at least akin to the mobilization needed for the Cold War. That was hard in the late 1940s and required a communist invasion of South Korea to accomplish it. Today, absent some even larger geopolitical catastrophe, it seems a political fantasy.

Moreover, it is not necessary. From the perspective of protecting U.S. national security and ensuring U.S. prosperity – of making U.S. foreign policy relevant again for the American public – the current task appears much more manageable. The United States, after all, retains advantages that are the envy of every other country, including rising powers such as China. Two large oceans, a highly innovative economy, a global network of alliances, a massive nuclear arsenal, and the world's best military provide a solid foundation on which to build. If the United States decided to create a more normal foreign policy, it could achieve its goals fairly easily.

The key to using those advantages effectively is to focus, to borrow a formulation from French President Emmanuel Macron, on a U.S. foreign policy that protects. A foreign policy that protects provides tangible and comprehensible benefits to the broader population rather than to the elite that has run it for so long.

Such a foreign policy needs to start from the ground up – that is, America's economic and security needs at home. At the moment, the United States has few pressing security needs. Very little directly threatens the U.S. homeland, which implies it could get by with less foreign policy that is aimed at security threats that are distant in time and space.

Such a policy does involve some risk, of course – all non-luxurious foreign policies involve risk. The apostles of global leadership claim that without America acting to regulate global affairs, some areas of the world will become less stable. That is a risk, but arguably the United States, with its inconsistent policies and incompetent interventions, has not been a force for stability in recent years. It is past time to ask whether these efforts really make us safer, or whether they simply express our foreign policy elites' fear of change. More to the point, this is no longer a policy that the United States can afford or has the domestic consensus to run.

The United States does still need and can still afford a foreign policy focused on promoting American prosperity and domestic strength. That means U.S. foreign policy should concentrate, as the Trump administration often has done, first and foremost on the international economic policies that affect all Americans – on trade, on immigration, and on the international regulatory issues that in an interdependent world increasingly determine the structure of the U.S. economy.

Unlike the Trump administration, however, U.S. foreign policy also should focus on global issues that matter at home, like climate change, corruption, and the regulation of cyberspace. In all cases, those policies should be aimed not at enriching corporations and the wealthy, but on supporting American workers and reducing inequality at home. In this way, U.S. foreign policy can cease to appear a distant plaything of elites and become a force for meaningful change in the lives of many Americans.

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This is not a counsel of isolationism. A foreign policy that begins at home does not end there. The United States, by virtue of its size, history, and culture, always will be a global player. It needs to retain its alliances and use its influence to promote stability in various regions of the world. For this purpose, America's historical alliances represent a unique source of its strength, one that China and other emerging powers lack.

But in a world of geopolitical competition, those alliances should serve more explicitly as force multipliers for promoting U.S. security, rather than only as channels through which to exercise American leadership and provide security benefits for U.S. partners. One doesn't need to insult and denigrate U.S. allies, as President Trump often has done, to convince them that a more equal alliance structure will create a more lasting American commitment to their security. Many U.S. allies

already understand the changing nature of power in the world and already have begun to accept a new, more balanced arrangement.

But being involved in the world does not have to entail taking responsibility for security and stability in every corner of the globe. It does not require chasing terrorists through faraway deserts and jungles, nor solving human rights issues in other countries that have little bearing on American security. And it does not mean fighting battles for U.S. allies that can fight them on their own.

Such a policy provides for less than perfect security. Americans have grown used to a foreign policy that does not accept even distant risks. So even as the public desires a foreign policy that focuses on their problems, it frightens easily when told scary stories of distant Islamist terrorists or North Korean nuclear weapons. If the foreign policy elites want to return from the political wilderness to which the Trump administration has condemned them, they will need to cease using scare tactics and create a narrative that explains how U.S. foreign policy can provide reasonable protection and prosperity to the people at home and yet accept that even the most powerful nation on earth cannot control destiny.

The era of luxury of in foreign policy is over, but the times of security and prosperity can continue.

DOES AMERICA NEED A FOREIGN POLICY?

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**REQUIEM FOR A DREAM:
AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY, 1991–2018**

JOSHUA R. ITZKOWITZ SHIFRINSON

Introduction

After a period of limited success, the United States' post-Cold War grand strategy is increasingly a failure.¹ To say so is not to insult the men and women who have committed their lives to public service, nor to gloss over the many accomplishments wrought by U.S. foreign engagement. However, on the core issue of whether American grand strategy has left the United States in a more secure position compared with plausible alternatives, America's foreign engagement has been premised on faulty assumptions, implemented in problematic ways, and focused on secondary issues. In an age of renewed populism and great-power competition, it is no surprise that many outside the corridors of power seek a change in the status quo – to paraphrase the American philosopher Hank Hill, this grand strategy ain't right.

More concretely, American grand strategy is failing because it lost sight of two realities of international relations. The first – that international politics are colored by states' desire for security given the uncertain intentions of others – is a regular mistake made by other great powers.² The second – that effective strategy requires setting priorities and allocating resources among competing demands – is particularly problematic when a state is uniquely powerful and, like the United States after 1991, confronts few obvious, clear, and compelling threats.³ Regardless, the United States since the Cold War's end not only adopted a highly expansive grand strategy that threw American weight around in ways that worried others, but often engaged in foreign excursions that had little to do with issues that affected core U.S. security. As a result, it simultaneously frittered away its strength on secondary concerns and incentivized – and, in some cases, abetted – other states to scale back the United States' power position.

This situation is not necessarily surprising: Strategic innovation tends to occur in response to failure, and the United States' post-Cold War dominance was such that obvious failures were few and far between. Still, the outcome is remarkable. Given the advantages enjoyed by the United States in the early 1990s, unipolarity might reasonably have been expected to last decades. Instead, owing heavily to U.S. grand strategy, great-power competition is back after barely 20 years.⁴

Adjusting to this situation will be no easy task. Not only does the United States need to cast off many of the intellectual shibboleths that contributed to this situation (more on these later), but the United States' grand strategic toolkit must be adjusted for modern times. Military

hardware, economic capabilities, diplomatic relationships, and human capital all need change. To be clear, there is much that can be salvaged from the current state of affairs. Still, the United States is entering a new era in which the attitudes and approaches that guided it after the Cold War – and had their antecedents during the contest with the Soviet Union – need major renovation.

Given the advantages enjoyed by the United States in the early 1990s, unipolarity might reasonably have been expected to last decades. Instead, owing heavily to U.S. grand strategy, great-power competition is back after barely 20 years.

The remainder of this essay proceeds in several sections. Following this introduction, I offer standards to evaluate U.S. grand strategy. Next, I review the evolution of U.S. grand strategy since 1991, before – third – evaluating this record against these standards. Fourth, I highlight elements of an alternate grand strategy suited for an era of geopolitical flux. I then briefly conclude.

Setting the Standard

At the broadest level, grand strategy refers to a state's theory on how to cause security for itself by linking the goals it believes will produce this security with the means – particularly military – at its disposal to obtain these ends.⁵ In evaluating grand strategy, the question becomes twofold. First, does a specific grand strategy limit threats to one's security? Relations with other great powers are particularly salient to this issue, given their significant capabilities and ability to shape the strategic environment to which a grand strategy responds. One wants to know whether a grand strategy adequately shapes relations vis-à-vis other great powers to promote cooperation where possible and minimize military threats where it must.⁶ Second, are the tools and techniques chosen to promote security appropriate to the task? That is, are ends and means “integrated” – with clear priorities set among different goals, adequate resources devoted to their resolution, and due consideration given to potential second- and third-order effects of one's efforts – or do ends and means run at cross

purposes, such that applying the strategy creates more problems and generates more risk than it solves?⁷

Prima facie, these questions might seem of little relevance when evaluating the United States after the Cold War. After all, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States no longer faced a great-power challenger that could credibly mount a sustained challenge to U.S. interests short of an all-out nuclear war.⁸

The United States' need was to shape an international environment that would protect this position; in context, this meant either sustaining the United States' preeminence or – if that was judged impossible – to ensure stable relations developed with future great powers as they arose.

One therefore might argue that the way to evaluate the United States' grand strategy is not to assess its capacity for creating security, but its ability to promote an interlocking set of relationships – what some call an “international order” – broadly conducive to interests such as the spread of capitalism and liberal democracy.⁹ This view, however, is wrong. Benefiting from an unprecedented degree of security after 1990–91, the United States' need was to shape an international environment that would protect this position; in context, this meant either sustaining the United States' preeminence or – if that was judged impossible – to ensure stable relations developed with future great powers as they arose.¹⁰ To assess post-Cold War American grand strategy is therefore to ask how the United States fared in these tasks.

The Post-Cold War Trajectory

The basic answer to these questions is “not well.” A large body of literature traces the United States' post-Cold War foreign engagement, with more on the way as archives open and researchers gain access to materials needed to analyze the history.¹¹ Without relitigating the specific twists and turns of post-1991 foreign policy, it is worth trying to describe the general history of the period.

Briefly, the end of the Cold War prompted American policymakers to recommit the United States to sustained engagement in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East; for the sake of parsimony, this essay will focus primarily on the first two regions.¹² The commitment per se was nothing new – the United States intervened in both world wars and played an active role in shaping Eurasia's

security and political life during the Cold War to prevent a return to the internecine great-power conflict that had brought catastrophe in 1914–19 and 1939–45.¹³ With the Soviet Union defeated and the United States the world's sole superpower after 1991, however, the core logic of American engagement shifted: While the desire to ensure Eurasian stability remained, the way of fostering this stability required the United States remain

the dominant power abroad. Thus, and as the 1991 Defense Planning Guidance and its successors famously declared, American power was now to be used to prevent the re-emergence of great power rivals able to challenge American preeminence. Notably, these challengers were as much identified as actors in the American orbit – with the European Community (later Union)

and Japan singled out – as they were states such as Russia and China beyond the United States' direct influence.¹⁴

To attain these ends, the organs of U.S. foreign policy were repackaged for the post-Cold War era. Gone was a military, diplomatic corps, and economic system designed for containment. In its place were a host of activities believed vital to sustain American preeminence. In Europe, for example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, once used to mobilize Western European resources and counterbalance the Soviet Union, was rebranded as a collective security mechanism that could provide European stability writ large, anchor the American presence on the Continent, and ensure the United States could play an outside role in calling Europe's security shots.¹⁵ Indeed, largely at the United States' behest, the alliance would start moving into the former Soviet Union's former sphere of influence starting in the mid-1990s – significantly, without actually deploying forces into the area (in fact, the U.S. military presence in Europe was reduced significantly after 1991).¹⁶

Similarly, the United States engaged Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union in an effort to promote democracy, liberal values, and capitalism in the former Soviet core, believing such steps were necessary to prevent future Russian revisionism. This effort continued even as Russian reform faltered in the early to mid-2000s. And despite Russia's liberal backsliding, American policymakers remained committed to finding a quid pro quo with Russian leaders to sustain a more or less peaceable relationship.¹⁷ Not coincidentally, the dual NATO and Russian pillars of U.S. policy in Europe were mutually

reinforcing: After all, sustaining and enlarging NATO provided a hedge against potential Russian ill behavior, just as Russian engagement amid NATO's repackaging as a security rather than defense organization vitiated the need for Cold War-style defense efforts.¹⁸

America's Asia policy underwent a parallel shift. Like NATO, the United States' alliances with South Korea and Japan were sustained into the post-Cold War era, and both states were kept under the U.S. security blanket.¹⁹ To a far greater extent than with Russia, however, American engagement with China took off. Having spent much of the second half of the Cold War in a loose alliance against the Soviet Union, the 1990s and 2000s saw the dramatic expansion of economic, political, and military ties. Engagement was intended to facilitate China's rise

The fact that U.S. power far outstripped the countries in which the United States intervened led U.S. policymakers to overestimate what American power could accomplish in the targeted states.

in East Asia on the presumption that economic growth and external support would spur China's domestic liberalization and emergence as a "responsible stakeholder" in the diplomatic system designed by the United States.²⁰ As with Russia, however, the policy also faced important limits. U.S. strategists in the Clinton administration prepared to use the U.S.-Japanese alliance to counter China if and when engagement failed to reap its intended results.²¹ By the 2000s, this effort accelerated further as the Bush and subsequent Obama administrations built up U.S. military and political ties in and around Asia – a trend most prominent with India – in part to prepare for potential security competition.²²

Without being overtly competitive, in other words, U.S. policy converged on a system intended to incorporate as many states as possible into the American sphere of influence on favorable terms, while using the resulting framework to create barriers for powerful states – some of whom remained outside the United States' orbit – from challenging this framework.²³ Of course, shaping the United States' future security competition was not the only feature of U.S. grand strategy after 1991. Instead, American policy also saw the United States throw its weight around in a series of foreign interventions. The

increase was striking: As Monica Duffy Toft reports, where the United States engaged in 46 military interventions during the Cold War, the number jumped to 188 in the 1992–2017 period.²⁴ Nor is it just the frequency of intervention that matters – the United States also has evinced a strong preference for trying to reconstitute domestic order in the targets of its intervention along broadly liberal lines.²⁵

Though a noble task, such transformations are also difficult to effect, generally requiring efforts to alter the fundamental political and economic lives of these societies.²⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, such activities often consumed significant levels American time and resources. Intervention in the Bosnian conflict, for instance, led to more than a decade of U.S. involvement in reconstruction operations.²⁷ More dramatically, U.S. troops remain in Kosovo 20 years after the 1999 Kosovo War, just as the last half-decade witnessed creeping American involvement in the Syrian Civil War (though the latter is ostensibly changing).²⁸ Meanwhile, the Iraq War will have cost several trillion dollars and nearly 45,000 killed or wounded U.S. troops (plus thousands more Iraqis) by the time it concludes. And the United States has spent nearly two decades, upwards of \$1 trillion in direct operations costs, and sustained thousands of casualties trying to shape Afghanistan's domestic order, only for the effort to be seen increasingly as an unwinnable exercise.²⁹ There is a legitimate question over whether the burdens in these operations are sustainable, but that is beside the point: The real issue is whether the resources could have been better allocated elsewhere.³⁰

Insofar as the costs involved far exceeded initial expectations³¹ and frequently resulted in claims from within the U.S. government itself that the operations diverted resources from other important missions, it certainly appears that the opportunity costs were large and meaningful.³² Equally significant, the prior costs of these operations carry the potential to block clear-eyed assessments of American opportunities such that resource drains continue. After all, with time, energy, resources, and personal reputations wrapped up in these operations, there is often understandable reluctance – visible in debates over whether a "better deal" was possible in Iraq, or whether U.S. sacrifices in Afghanistan require continued engagement – by U.S. stakeholders with skin in the game to cut bait.³³

Unlike American efforts at influencing the opportunities and preferences of potential competitors, such interventions were more an outgrowth of American grand strategy than a central pillar of American policy.

That is, because the end of the Cold War left the United States significantly more capable and with far greater strategic reach than potential rivals, there were few constraints on the U.S. exercise of force. Likewise, the fact that U.S. power far outstripped the countries in which the United States intervened led U.S. policymakers to overestimate what American power could accomplish in the targeted states. These conditions allowed shifts in American domestic politics, coupled with a foreign policy establishment believing in the application of American power, to spur a raft of foreign engagements. Simply put, sustaining American preeminence was the focus of U.S. strategy, but the preeminence the United States already enjoyed was the key enabler of America's post-Cold War interventionism and engagement.³⁴

Evaluating the Strategy

One might read the preceding and conclude that the United States pursued a wise and effective grand strategy.³⁵ After all, American policymakers in the preceding telling indeed focused on fostering a benign future security environment involving both prospective challengers and potential trouble spots in the strategic periphery and deployed American power to those ends. Considering, too, that the post-Cold War world remains largely free of the sort of major war that marked the pre-1914 and interwar periods, and it might seem the United States effectively shaped its security environment.³⁶

These looks are deceiving. In fact, the American grand strategy described above has increasingly failed, given the criteria laid out earlier in this paper.

First, U.S. strategy since 1991 contained an internal contradiction. Although focused on preventing another state from threatening American preeminence, the tools chosen to get there were out of sync with the ends sought. To sustain preeminence, U.S. policymakers needed – as they recognized – to suppress prospective challengers from emerging. As noted, however, a large portion of American grand strategy after 1991 focused instead on engaging prospective rivals. This was particularly the case vis-à-vis China, where engagement called for helping the PRC develop economically and politically in expectation that such support would ameliorate future problems by encouraging (1) domestic liberalization, and subsequently (2) diplomatic, military, and economic structures favored by the United States.³⁷

The problem with this approach is simple: While affording China room to mount a firmer challenge to U.S. interests if it wanted, it offered little insurance

against the possibility that events in China would go in a direction other than that preferred by the United States. Put simply, engagement relied on an uncertain political calculus to produce the strategic outcome the United States wanted, even as the policy increased these states' capacity to challenge American interests. As Ely Ratner and Kurt Campbell – ironically, two of the intellectual architects of U.S.-Chinese relations in the Obama years – recently acknowledged, this effort “failed.”³⁸ The net result thus leaves a disenchanted United States facing an empowered – and, as scholars such as Robert Ross and Michael Swaine observe, increasingly fearful – China.³⁹

Of course, and as noted, American preeminence preservation involved hedges via U.S. alliance commitments and military presence. Other elements of American strategy, however, undercut the effectiveness of U.S. efforts. On one level, and as Eugene Gholz points out, maintaining firm American ties with NATO members, Japan, and others led to the United States' enmeshment in their conflicts vis-à-vis Russia and China.⁴⁰ By sustaining its alliances, the United States necessarily has taken on their security concerns as its own for the sake of the alliances' continuation. Thus, even though the United States has little direct interest in East Asian island disputes, the United States' desire to preserve the credibility of its commitments with Japan (and other East Asian states) pushes the United States to make common cause with Japan against China in the contest.⁴¹ Similarly, the loss of many of NATO's East European member states would do little to shift the distribution of power between the United States and Russia; nevertheless, so long as the United States remains wedded to NATO and these states are in the alliance, the United States is exposed to their disputes with Moscow.⁴²

American alliances, in short, substitute American competition with Moscow and Beijing for the local competitions that otherwise would occur. In doing so, the United States needlessly worsens its own relations with other, increasingly powerful states – it courts conflicts of interest when few are otherwise present. The United States also forfeits many of its military advantages along the way as, having to protect clients located near the borders of Russia and China, it is forced to operate in areas where Chinese and Russian military power can best be brought to bear. As debates over NATO reinforcement in Eastern Europe and concerns over declining U.S. maritime power in the South and East China seas reveal, the situation forces the United States to bear increasing costs and risks for the privilege of protecting allies along the Eurasian littoral.⁴³

Nor is it just U.S. security commitments that make U.S. grand strategy problematic. By keeping military forces forward-deployed to hedge Chinese and Russian aggrandizement, the United States decreases the security these states enjoy. This, in turn, pushes them to counterbalance in ways that harm bilateral relations and undermine U.S. military advantages. The trend is particularly problematic in East Asia, where Chinese leaders seemingly worry what the United States may do with its significant military presence.⁴⁴ To be sure, the United States also worries about China's own ambitions, but that is beside the point: The United States' presence

Having made NATO and the U.S.-Japan alliance the cornerstones of American involvement in Europe and Asia, while also seeing states therein as prospective challengers in their own right, American policy effectively infantilized these states.

likely prompts China to compete more intensely than otherwise would be the case. Indeed, China's decision to develop so-called anti-access and area-denial capabilities aimed at hindering American military operations in the region illustrates the issue, highlighting that American efforts have prompted China to treat the United States as an adversary.⁴⁵ Even if one believes that East Asia without the United States would witness more Chinese aggression, it also is unlikely that the United States would be the primary target of Chinese concerns, given the presence of other potential threats nearer to the Chinese mainland. The same dynamic applies to Russia and Europe. In sum, U.S. efforts to hedge while engaging prospective great powers harms U.S. relations with those actors and accelerates problematic shifts in the local distribution of power.

Still, antagonizing China and Russia would be manageable if the United States also cultivated effective partners with which it could share the burden of responding to Russian and Chinese pushback. However, even as the United States antagonized powerful states outside of its security perimeter, American strategy deprived the United States of effective assistance from what should be other capable Eurasian states. Having made NATO and the U.S.-Japan alliance the cornerstones of American

involvement in Europe and Asia, while also seeing states therein as prospective challengers in their own right, American policy effectively infantilized these states. On the one hand, with American security guarantees intact, allies were free to cheap-ride on American security largesse. Without denying that allies have made notable contributions to many post-Cold War operations, even the most capable American partners punch below their weight. Germany, for instance, is virtually unable to field an effective military, British and French funding shortfalls have hindered military operations against both Kosovo and Libya, while Japan has engaged in 20 years of hand-wringing over whether moderate defense spending increases and an enlarged operational footprint are even legally permissible.⁴⁶ Considering these states historically have not shied away from assembling military power – indeed, many played critical roles in Western defense efforts during the Cold War – the post-Cold War change is remarkable and virtually inexplicable without an American security blanket.⁴⁷

Of course, American leaders have occasionally recognized and increasingly criticized the allies for underproviding for their own defense.⁴⁸ Yet it also is true that the United States has not always welcomed allied efforts to play a greater role in post-Cold War security issues. Instead, part of the allied infantilization witnessed has been at the United States' behest.⁴⁹ For example, various efforts by the Western European allies to pool resources and play a more independent role in European security deliberations were opposed by different U.S. administrations as a threat to NATO (and thus U.S. preeminence);⁵⁰ subsequent initiatives such as the European Security and Defense Program and the more recent Permanent Structured Cooperation, meanwhile, are expressly presented as being under or secondary to NATO, and so disincentivize real allied efforts to step up by reinforcing the ability to ride cheap.⁵¹

Similarly, even as U.S. policymakers regularly encouraged greater Japanese military spending and Japan's assumption of new missions in the post-Cold War period, U.S. strategy remained premised on ensuring U.S. "leadership" within the alliance. Likewise, U.S. efforts at spurring Japanese military efforts focused heavily on pushing Japan to play a greater role in defending its home territory, securing the sea lanes of communication immediately around Japan, and participating in humanitarian and counterterrorism operations.⁵² Missing, in other words, were the sort of power projection and high-end military operations that might enable Japan to play a more active role in regional security, or even to provide more for its own security.

Finally, it is worth noting the pernicious effect that U.S. interventionism and the associated domestic transformation efforts has had on U.S. relations with other major powers. First, the efforts were often time and energy sinks. In retrospect, the Balkan conflicts, Iraq, and Afghanistan consumed a significant portion of U.S. policymakers' time and attention. This crowded out energy that could be focused on shaping relations with major states in Europe and Asia. Famously, for instance, the George W. Bush administration's focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan short-circuited efforts to redouble the U.S. commitment to Asia, just as the Obama administration's later "Pivot" to Asia was stymied by calls to address short-term exigencies around the greater Middle East (as well as reinforcing U.S. presence in Europe, given apparent Russian assertiveness) after 2011.⁵³ Second, the interventions and state building efforts drained American resources. Although wartime funding allowed the U.S. services to recapitalize and modernize many high-end units through the mid-2010s, the increased operations tempo – coming against a force that was intended to be numerically smaller than at other times in U.S. history – has contributed to maintenance, training, and upkeep shortfalls.⁵⁴ High operational rates also led to gaps in many of the day-to-day tools (e.g., weapons stocks) critical to warfighting.⁵⁵ Moreover, given the large cost of the conflict, it is plausible that U.S. economic growth suffered due to the financial outlays: even if the costs of the conflict are themselves bearable, the resources likely could have been spent more produc-

The U.S. military is now poorly structured for a new era of great-power politics – possessing too-few relevant platforms and insufficient personnel – and lacks the budget to rectify the imbalance.

tively elsewhere.⁵⁶ Third, and partly as a result of paying for and innovating in response to such conflicts, the U.S. military is now poorly structured for a new era of great-power politics – possessing too-few relevant platforms and insufficient personnel – and lacks the budget to rectify the imbalance.⁵⁷

Above all, U.S. interventions undercut relations with other major powers. Contestation over the 2003 Iraq War, for one, undermined U.S. ties with France, Germany, and Russia.⁵⁸ Likewise, both Russia and China were incensed over the 1999 Kosovo War, by some accounts seeing the United States' willingness to intervene without U.N. authorization as proof that the United

States' professed willingness to abide by international norms and to use its great power in a responsible manner, was deceptive; that Serbia was a close Russian ally and that the United States ended up bombing the Chinese embassy in Belgrade only exacerbated problems.⁵⁹ The degree to which these interventions affected U.S. foreign relations as compared to other factors remains up for debate. Still, the actions were minimally needless irritants to other major powers with which the United States sought to engage.

Toward a New Path

To summarize, the United States' post-Cold War grand strategy has been superficially well constructed but deeply problematic in practice. American policymakers sought to manage the United States' relations with other major powers in Eurasia so as to extend the United States' unipolar period. The way in which it did so, however, virtually ensured that this exercise failed and left the United States in a vulnerable position. Extending American preeminence required the United States prevent other states from cutting into the United States' relative position – instead, American policy abetted others' growth. This itself would have been manageable had American policy adjusted in response to this situation, but, by failing to reconcile ends and means, U.S. strategy helped antagonize other major powers while infantilizing other states that might otherwise bear more (or all) of the burdens in addressing the security risks

attendant to a shifting distribution of power. Baldly stated, the United States after the Cold War could have tried to freeze the distribution of power in its favor, or accommodated itself to the inevitable shifts while empowering partners and adjusting its own footprint to best manage

the shift. By choosing neither, it is left in an increasingly overextended and vulnerable position.

How can the United States extricate itself from this situation? Part of the solution first comes in recognizing the problem – no easy task given that many analysts seem to believe that the problem of American overextension, allied infantilization, and great-power rivalry can be resolved with largely operational fixes to the status quo.⁶⁰ More directly, however, any solution requires a conceptual shift in terms of how U.S. policymakers understand and assess the United States' security options.⁶¹

American policymakers tend to associate U.S. national security with sustained American preeminence: being

To summarize, the United States' post-Cold War grand strategy has been superficially well constructed but deeply problematic in practice.

the strongest actor globally and in strategically salient regions such as Europe and Asia. This is unsurprising. After all, the United States is hardly the first country to associate its security with its relative power position. Indeed, given the United States' triumph in the Cold War – emerging from the contest as the sole remaining superpower, with its power base intact and its allies in the fold – it would have been highly surprising if U.S. policymakers did not give serious thought to maintaining the United States' unprecedentedly advantageous geopolitical position. Considering, too, that organizations tend to innovate most directly in response to obvious failures and the United States' post-Cold War advantages were such that overt problems were few and far between, the incentive to recognize and adapt to the problems outlined above were limited.

Given the deep contradictions in American grand strategy, the time is right for a course adjustment. In particular, U.S. policymakers should consider leveraging the United States' geographic and strategic position while empowering capable states overseas to do more to provide for their own security.⁶²

What would elements of this strategy look like in practice? For one thing, the United States would significantly reduce or curtail its security commitments in and around Eurasia. The objective is not as – some have suggested – a pell-mell retreat, but a graduated series of steps that would ramp down the U.S. security presence. In doing so, the United States would simultaneously take itself out of the proximate line of fire of prospective adversaries such as Russia and China, while limiting the ability of states such as Japan and Germany to cheap-ride on U.S. security largesse. The objective would be to foster a more or less stable balance of power in critical Eurasian regions in which local actors such as Japan and Germany confronted prospective disturbances from states such as China and Russia in the regions in question. As scholars such as Barry Posen, Stephen Walt, and John Mearsheimer offer, there are many reasons to be optimistic that such an outcome is possible.⁶³ Europe and Asia each have multiple players with significant economic capacity, technological prowess, and latent military potential. Moreover, given Eurasian political geography, these states should be able to adopt

security postures that hem in potential adversaries – making the consequences of aggrandizement appear highly costly – by adopting their own versions of anti-access/area-denial military policies.⁶⁴ That defensive and deterrent policies tend to be less financially costly than offensive strategies reinforces the feasibility of this route, creating the potential that a stable strategic balance is possible even with limited resources allocated to defense and security measures.

Notably, even as this effort reduced U.S. day-to-day involvement in Eurasian security affairs, it might reinforce U.S. security, generate economic returns, afford it greater strategic flexibility, and even – paradoxically – *strengthen* the United States' net power position. First, with major states like Germany, Russia, Japan, and China pushed to balance one another, the U.S. defense budget could fall by a proportional amount, and the savings invested in other, potentially more productive activities. Indeed, given the size of the U.S. defense budget, even moderate savings would produce substantial resources that could be returned, inter alia, in the form of tax reductions, increased infrastructure spending, or investment in science and research.⁶⁵

Second, freed of firm and fixed security commitments that entangle it in competition with other capable states, the United States would be able to take a more relaxed stance toward Eurasian political squabbles. If tensions mounted, U.S. policymakers would have greater latitude to decide whether, when, and how to intervene to best meet American interests. Furthermore, because this approach assumes no fixed and firm U.S. commitments, it creates the possibility of some degree of cooperation with Russia and/or China in situations where current American allies were judged problematic, thereby capping the extent to which China and Russia were automatically treated as American rivals (and vice versa). Finally, because the United States would no longer be the balancer of first resort in Eurasia and compelled to bear the costs and risks which that entails, it increases the likelihood that the United States could utilize problems in Eurasia to strengthen its relative position. After all, by leaving room for the United States to decide whether and how to intervene in Eurasian politics at opportune times, the approach allows U.S. policymakers to optimize the terms and conditions of American involvement while increasing the likelihood that other states will be those most weakened in the course of any geopolitical contest. Although perhaps not a pleasant idea to entertain, the United States potentially would be able to improve its relative position by having other countries be the primary expenders of blood and treasure if Eurasian problems mount.

Critics might object that there is no guarantee that an equilibrium will emerge if the United States leaves those regions. Wars tend to occur when states disagree over the distribution of power, just as the history of European and Asian politics contains ample room for concern.⁶⁶ By the same measure, there are understandable worries that major players in Eurasia may bandwagon rather than balance prospective threats, potentially abetted by external subversion of their political systems.⁶⁷ These are all valid concerns. However, it is equally true that there is no guarantee that the current U.S. approach to Eurasia will produce peace, given the shifting distribution of power in Asia, the ambiguous distribution of power and will around Europe's eastern flashpoints, and the hollowing out of U.S. alliances as security devices. Furthermore, it should go without saying that if potential balancers in Eurasia are prone to bandwagoning and subversion, then throwing an American security blanket over them is hardly a panacea: Doing so simply leaves the United States vulnerable to their own abandonment.

Conclusion

No grand strategy is without problems. Resources are limited, threats can be ambiguous, and domestic politics may challenge the coherence of any preferred strategic approach. Still, the United States today faces a pressing need for a deep readjustment in its grand strategy. Created at the height of the United States' post-Cold War preeminence, changes in the geopolitical landscape mean that American grand strategy is now beset with internal contradictions and courts strategic dilemmas with friends and foes alike. A major course adjustment – one requiring policymakers to embrace a different mindset as to what U.S. security requires and to adopt different tools to attain this end – is in order. This adjustment will be neither easy nor risk- and cost-free. Still, the problems involved pale in comparison to the dilemmas that may result from continuing the current approach, or that could manifest should the United States be forced to adjust course abruptly in response to an unexpected crisis. Ultimately, grand strategy exists to help a state obtain security for itself. With unipolarity waning and efforts to sustain preeminence riven with problems, the time has come for policymakers to reconsider the fundamental focus, logic, and tools of U.S. grand strategy. A new course is needed for a renewed era of great-power competition.

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7. The question of whether tools are appropriate to the ends sought is an underappreciated aspect of the grand strategy debate. For discussion of this issue, see Posen, *Sources*, 24–29.
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 21. This perspective was confirmed in conversation with a former senior Defense Department official with the Clinton administration.
 22. On U.S. counterbalancing, see Nina Silove, “The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia,” *International Security*, 40 no. 4 (April 1, 2016), 45–88. For American efforts to court India and problems therein, see Ashley Tellis, “Narendra Modi and U.S.-India Relations” in Bibek Debroy, Anirban Ganguly, and Kishore Desai; Paul Staniland, eds., *Making of New India: Transformation Under the Modi Government* (Wisdom Tree Press, 2018); “America Has High Expectations for India. Can New Delhi Deliver?” *War on the Rocks*, February 22, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/america-has-high-expectations-for-india-can-new-delhi-deliver/>.
 23. Posen, “Stability and Change in U.S. Grand Strategy.”
 24. Monica Dufft Toft, “Why Is America Addicted to Foreign Interventions?” *The National Interest*, December 10, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-america-addicted-foreign-interventions-23582>.
 25. See Andrew Radin, “The Limits of State Building: The Politics of War and the Ideology of Peace,” PhD Dissertation, Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012.
 26. Ibid.
 27. See R. Cody Philips, “Bosnia: The U.S. Army’s Role in Peace Enforcement Operations,” Center for Military History Report 70-97-1, <https://history.army.mil/html/books/070/70-97-1/index.html>.
 28. On Kosovo, see James Dobbins et al., *America’s Role in Nation Building* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2003), Chapter 7; Ioannis Armakolas et al., *State-Building in Post-Independence Kosovo: Policy Challenges and Societal Considerations* (Pristina: Kosovo Open Society Foundation, 2017); and NATO, “Kosovo Force: Key Facts and Figures,” December 2018, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_12/20181202_2018-12-KFOR_Placemat.pdf. On Syria, see Carla Humid, Christopher Blanchard, and Mary Beth Dunham Nikitin, “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response,” Congressional Research Service Report RL33487, February 27, 2018; Liz Sly, “Withdrawing U.S. Troops from Syria is Proving Easier Said Than Done,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/withdrawing-us-troops-from-syria-is-proving-easier-said-than-done/2019/02/08/22092d22-249e-11e9-b5b4-1d18dfb7b084_story.html?utm_term=.619a83c91d7c.
 29. Neta Crawford, “United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2019: \$5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated,” Watson Institute of Brown University, November 14, 2018, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019.pdf.
 30. Thanks go to Michael Beckley for highlighting the debate over the sustainability of U.S. burdens.
 31. For unexpected costs – military and economic – see James Fallows, “Paying the Costs of Iraq. For Decades to Come,” *The Atlantic*, March 29, 2013; Benjamin Lambeth, *NATO’s Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001); and Joel Rayburn and Frank Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Volume 1: Invasion, Insurgency, and Civil War, 2003–2006* (Washington: Center for Military History, 2019).

32. In the late 1990s, for instance, a series of internal audits suggested that repeated interventions had undercut the U.S. military's overall readiness; Government Accountability Office, "Impact of Operations Other Than War on the Services Varies," GAO/NSIAD 99-69, May 1999. Similarly, ongoing commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan – coupled with frequent but irregular efforts to project power to hot spots around the globe – have hindered efforts to rebalance forces and "sustain the capabilities necessary to prevail across a full range of potential contingencies;" see Government Accountability Office, "Department of Defense: Actions Needed to Address Five Key Mission Challenges," GAO 17-369, June 2017. To this, it is also worth noting that sustained combat operations – particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan – also resulted in higher-than-anticipated financial and healthcare commitments to veterans, increasing the long-term costs of U.S. engagement.
33. See, for instance, Ryan Crocker, "I Was Ambassador to Afghanistan. This Deal is a Surrender," *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-was-ambassador-to-afghanistan-this-deal-is-a-surrender/2019/01/29/8700ed68-2409-11e9-ad53-824486280311_story.html?utm_term=.05a836b-b9a4e.
34. Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics*, 61 no. 1 (January 2009), 197-98.
35. For the best statement that America's post-Cold War strategy has been a success – albeit not without occasional excess – see Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*.
36. Of course, as Nuno Monteiro observes, there has been substantial violence in the unipolar era. Nuno Monteiro, "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful," *International Security*, 36 no. 3 (January 2012), 9-40.
37. Thomas Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: Norton, 2015); Thomas J. Christensen, "Shaping the Choices of a Rising China: Recent Lessons for the Obama Administration," *The Washington Quarterly*, 32 no. 3 (July 2009), 89-104.
38. Campbell and Ratner, "The China Reckoning," 62.
39. Robert S. Ross, "The Problem With the Pivot," *Foreign Affairs*, 91 no. 6 (December 11, 2012); Michael Swaine, "A Relationship Under Extreme Duress: U.S.-China Relations at a Crossroads," Carter Center Analysis, January 16, 2019, <https://carnegiendowment.org/2019/01/16/relationship-under-extreme-duress-u.s.-china-relations-at-crossroads-pub-78159>; and Michael Swaine, "Chinese Views on the State of the Sino-U.S. Relationship in 2018," *China Leadership Monitor*, November 26, 2018, <https://carnegiendowment.org/2018/11/26/chinese-views-on-state-of-sino-u.s.-relationship-in-2018-pub-77778>. Regarding the consolidation of an anti-Chinese stance in U.S. policymaking circles, two prominent analysts observe that "over the last two years, a near-consensus has crystallized among China-watchers that Washington and Beijing are locked in a great power competition over vital economic and security interests;" see Ryan Hass and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Responsible Competition and the Future of U.S.-China Relations," *Brookings Blog*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/02/06/responsible-competition-and-the-future-of-u-s-china-relations/>. For the long-term roots of such attitudes, however, see Emma Ashford and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Trump's National Security Strategy: A Critic's Dream," *Texas National Security Review*, 1 no. 2 (March 2018), 139-44.
40. Eugene Gholz, "The Case for Restraint in U.S. Foreign Policy," Comments to Cato Institution Conference, June 15, 2016, <https://www.cato.org/events/case-restraint-us-foreign-policy>.
41. For the role of credibility in pushing U.S. policy on Japan, see James Schoff, "Obama's Quiet Priority In Japan: The East China Sea," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 10, 2014, <https://carnegiendowment.org/2014/04/10/obama-s-quiet-priority-in-japan-east-china-sea-pub-55311>. See also Obama's response to James Acosta in the White House, "Joint Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan," April 24, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/24/joint-press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan>.
42. Joshua Shiffrin, "Time to Consolidate NATO?" *The Washington Quarterly*, 40 no. 1 (January 2, 2017), 109-23.
43. David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016); Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015).
44. On Chinese concerns with the United States, see M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).
45. Luis Simon, "Demystifying the A2/AD Buzz," *War On the Rocks*, January 4, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/demystifying-the-a2ad-buzz/>; Andrew Krepinovich and Barry Watts, *Meeting the Anti-Access and Area-Denial Challenge* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2003); and "An Anti-Access History Lesson," *The Diplomat*, May 25, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/05/an-anti-access-history-lesson/>.
46. Posen, *Restraint*, 35-44; Richard Samuels, "Wing Walking: The US-Japan Alliance," *Global Asia*, 4 no. 1 (March 2009), 16-21.
47. To be clear, this assumes that the U.S. argument that Russia and China represent ongoing great-power challengers is correct; if, in fact, one or both states are strategic pygmies, then allied behavior is more readily explicable.

48. Then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates, for instance, famously warned NATO members that “there will be dwindling appetite and patience . . . to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources . . . to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.” Likewise, the Trump administration repeatedly – and antagonistically – has called out allies in Europe and Asia for spending too little on defense. See Michael Birnbaum, “Gates Rebukes European Allies in Farewell Speech,” *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/gates-rebuked-european-allies-in-farewell-speech/2011/06/10/AG9tKeOH_story.html?utm_term=.7a450be68ecc; Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Trump Warns NATO Allies to Spend More on Defense, or Else,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/world/europe/trump-nato.html>; and Robin Emmott, “Trump Effect? Europe’s Defense Spending to Rise Faster in 2017,” Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-defence/trump-effect-europes-defense-spending-to-rise-faster-in-2017-idUSKBN19J0ZV>. The different approaches taken by Trump and his predecessors in approaching the issue raise real questions over what options exist for the United States to diminish allied free-riding. Prima facie, if prior administrations were too gentle to effect a change in allied behavior, the current approach risks significant blowback and opposition by antagonizing U.S. partners.
49. Indeed, as two of the foremost proponents of the current U.S. grand strategy argue, “If free-riding is indeed a dilemma, however, it is also an implicit goal of US alliances.” See Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “What Are America’s Alliances Good For?” *Parameters*, 47 no. 2 (Summer 2017), 21.
50. Alyson Bailes, “NATO’s European Pillar: The European Security and Defense Identity,” *Defense Analysis*, 15 no. 3 (1999), 305-22; Krupnick, “Not What They Wanted.” See also Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 145-47.
51. See, inter alia, Barry Posen, “European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?” *Security Studies*, 15 no. 2 (April-June 2006), 166-73; Sven Biscop, “PESCO: Good News for NATO from the EU,” *Egmont Institute*, February 14, 2018, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/pesco-good-news-nato-eu/>.
52. In fact, the 1995 Nye Report – which became the cornerstone of the United States’ post-Cold War efforts vis-à-vis Japan – praised the “division of roles and missions” between the United States and Japan that saw Japan focus “on defense of the home islands and sea lane defense out to 1000 nautical miles while the United States has assumed responsibility for power projection and nuclear deterrence.” Department of Defense, United States Security Strategy for the East-Asia Pacific Region (Washington: Department of Defense, 1995), <http://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/JPUS/19950227.O1E.html>. On new missions, see Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, *The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Getting Asia Right through 2020* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csispubs/070216_asia2020.pdf; Richard Armitage et al., “The United States and Japan: Advancing toward a Mature Partnership,” *National Defense University/Institute for National Security Studies Special Report*, October 11, 2000, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a403599.pdf>.
53. Jacques deLisle, “9/11 and U.S.-China Relations,” Foreign Policy Research Institute e-Note, September 3, 2011, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2011/09/911-and-u-s-china-relations/>; Melvyn Leffler, “9/11 in Retrospect,” *Foreign Affairs*, 90 no. 5 (September/October 2011), 33-34; Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, John Schaus, and Mark Cancian, *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016), 43-46; and Michael O’Hanlon, “Missing Hillary Clinton’s Hand in the Asia Rebalance,” Brookings Op-Ed, December 13, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/missing-hillary-clintons-hand-in-the-asia-rebalance/>. See also Obama’s own evaluation of the pivot and the difficulties thereof in Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/#2>.
54. On U.S. procurement, see Russell Rumbaugh, *What We Bought: Defense Procurement from FY01 to FY10* (Washington: Stimson Center, 2011), <https://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/Contentv2.1.pdf>. On maintenance and readiness issues, see Government Accountability Office, “Army Readiness: Progress and Challenges in Rebuilding Personnel, Equipping, and Training,” GAO-19-367T, February 6, 2019, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/696780.pdf>; Government Accountability Office, “Air Force Readiness: Actions Needed to Rebuild Readiness and Prepare for the Future,” GAO-19-120T, October 10, 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/694923.pdf>; and Government Accountability Office, “Navy Readiness: Actions Needed to Address Persistent Maintenance, Training, and other Challenges Facing the Fleet,” GAO-17-798T, September 7, 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-17-798T>. On the difficulties such trends can pose operationally, see T. Christian Miller, Megan Rose, and Robert Faturechi, “Fight the Ship: Death and Valor on a Warship Doomed by its own Navy,” ProPublica, February 6, 2019, <https://features.propublica.org/navy-accidents/uss-fitzgerald-destroyer-crash-crystal/>.
55. Precision-guided munitions, in particular, were used at far higher rates in these conflicts than often anticipated; see Jeff Daniels, “US Has Depleted Much of Munitions Needed Against ISIS,” CNBC, April 26, 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/04/26/us-has-depleted-much-of-munitions-needed-against-isis.html>; Lambeth, *NATO’s Air War*, 171.
56. Projecting macroeconomic alternatives is always problematic. Still, insofar as many of the interventions highlighted above are wars of choice, the list of “public goods” that the funds could have procured – coupled with

- the long-term costs that the conflicts incurred – suggest long-term U.S. benefits that were crowded out by war funding. See, for instance, Center for American Progress, “The Opportunity Costs of the Iraq War,” August 25, 2004, <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/kf/Opportunity%20Cost%20of%20War%20Report%208%2025.pdf>; Loren Thompson, “Iraq Opportunity Costs: What America Could Have Had If It Never Invaded,” *Forbes*, June 27, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2014/06/27/iraq-opportunity-costs-what-america-could-have-had-if-it-never-invaded/#41a5728b773a>; Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz, “The Economic Costs of the Iraq War: An Appraisal Three Years After the Beginning of the Conflict,” NBER Working Paper 12054, February 2006, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w12054.pdf>; and Dean Baker, “The Economic Impact of the Iraq War and Higher Military Spending,” Center for Economic and Policy Research, May 2007, http://cepr.net/documents/publications/military_spending_2007_05.pdf. On the long-term costs of war for the United States (due to veterans’ benefits, costs from injury, etc.), see Ryan Edwards, “U.S. War Costs: Two Parts Temporary, One Part Permanent,” NBER Working Paper, June 2010, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w16108.pdf>.
57. See note 53.
 58. Philip Gordon, “The Crisis in the Alliance,” *Brookings Report*, February 24, 2003, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-crisis-in-the-alliance/>; Terry Terriff, “Fear and Loathing in NATO: The Atlantic Alliance after the Crisis over Iraq,” *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 5 no. 3 (2004), 419-46; Thomas Ambrosio, “The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq: International Status and the Role of Positional Goods,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57 no. 8 (December 2005), 1189-1210.
 59. Hill, *No Place For Russia*, 164-172; Cameron Abadi, “The Small War That Wasn’t,” *Foreign Policy*, January 2, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/02/the-small-war-that-wasnt/>.
 60. Octavian Manea, “The Case for a Grand Strategy of Responsible Competition to Defend the Liberal International Order,” *Small Wars Journal*, July 2017, <https://smallwars-journal.com/jrnl/art/the-case-for-a-grand-strategy-of-responsible-competition-to-defend-the-liberal-international>; Jake Sullivan, “More, Less, or Different?” *Foreign Affairs*, 98 no. 1 (January/February 2019); and Thomas Wright, “The Return to Great Power Rivalry Was Inevitable,” *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-return-to-great-power-rivalry-was-inevitable/>. For the reflexive and reactive nature of much U.S. thinking, see John Schaus, “Bad Idea: Competing with China (without Knowing What Winning Looks Like),” *CSIS Bad Ideas in National Security Series*, December 12, 2018, <https://defense360.csis.org/bad-idea-competing-with-china-without-knowing-what-winning-looks-like/>. For a thoughtful treatment on criteria by which strategy for a new era of great-power politics might be assessed, see Hal Brands, “The Lost Art of Long-Term Competition,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 41 no. 4 (Winter 2019), 31-51.
 61. On the importance of socialization and mindsets in the grand strategy debate, see Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed;” Walt, *Hell of Good Intentions*.
 62. See Joshua R. Shiffrin, “The Rise of China, Balance of Power Theory, and U.S. National Security: Reasons for Optimism?” *Journal of Strategic Studies* (online first view), 1-42; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin and Sameer Lalwani, “It’s a Commons Misunderstanding: The Limited Threat to American Command of the Commons,” in Christopher Preble and John Mueller, eds., *A Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2014), 229-44.
 63. Posen, *Restraint*; John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs*, 95 no. 4 (July/August 2016), 70-83.
 64. Eugene Gholz, “No Man’s Sea,” University of Notre Dame (Working Paper). See also Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China’s Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion,” *International Security*, 42 no. 2 (Fall 2017), 78-199.
 65. To put things in perspective, the requested Defense Budget for FY2019 is \$686 billion. A 10 percent reduction in this funding would amount to nearly \$69 billion, which alone is more than the requested budgets for the Departments of Education (\$60 billion), Energy (\$29 billion), and Health and Human Services (\$68.4 billion); see Office of Management and Budget, *Budget of the U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2019*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/budget-fy2019.pdf>.
 66. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1988).
 67. I am indebted to Robert Ross for conversations on the bandwagoning problem. That said, there are good reasons to be skeptical of the risk of too much bandwagoning; see Eric Labs, “Do Weak States Bandwagon?” *Security Studies*, 1 no. 3 (1992), 383-416.

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