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Pull Back

The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy

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Despite a decade of costly and indecisive warfare and mounting fiscal pressures, the long-standing consensus among American policymakers about U.S. grand strategy has remained remarkably intact. As the presidential

campaign made clear, Republicans and Democrats may quibble over foreign policy at the margins, but they agree on the big picture: that the United States should dominate the world militarily, economically, and politically, as it has since the final years of the Cold War, a strategy of liberal hegemony. The country, they hold, needs to preserve its massive lead in the global balance of power, consolidate its economic preeminence, enlarge the community of market democracies, and maintain its outsized influence in the international institutions it helped create.

To this end, the U.S. government has expanded its sprawling Cold War-era network of security commitments and military bases. It has reinforced its existing alliances, adding new members to NATO and enhancing its security agreement with Japan. In the Persian Gulf, it has sought to protect the flow of oil with a full panoply of air, sea, and land forces, a goal that consumes at least 15 percent of the U.S. defense budget. Washington has put China on a watch list, ringing it in with a network of alliances, less formal relationships, and military bases.

The United States' activism has entailed a long list of ambitious foreign policy projects. Washington has tried to rescue failing states, intervening militarily in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya, variously attempting to defend human rights, suppress undesirable nationalist movements, and install democratic regimes. It has also tried to contain so-called rogue states that oppose the United States, such as Iran, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, North Korea, and, to a lesser degree, Syria. After 9/11, the struggle against al Qaeda and its allies dominated the agenda, but the George W. Bush administration defined this enterprise broadly and led the country into the painful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the United States has long sought to discourage the spread of nuclear weapons, the prospect of nuclear-armed terrorists has added urgency to this objective, leading to constant tension with Iran and North Korea.

In pursuit of this ambitious agenda, the United States has consistently spent hundreds of billions of dollars per year on its military -- far more than the sum of the defense budgets of its friends and far more than the sum of those of its potential adversaries. It has kept that military busy: U.S. troops have spent roughly twice as many months in combat after the Cold War as they did during it. Today, roughly 180,000 U.S. soldiers remain stationed on foreign soil, not counting the tens of thousands more who have rotated through the war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thousands of American and allied soldiers have lost their lives, not to mention the countless civilians caught in the crossfire.

This undisciplined, expensive, and bloody strategy has done untold harm to U.S. national security. It makes enemies almost as fast as it slays them, discourages allies from paying for their own defense, and convinces powerful states to band together and oppose Washington's plans, further raising the costs of carrying out its foreign policy. During the 1990s, these consequences were manageable because the United States enjoyed such a favorable power position and chose its wars carefully. Over the last decade, however, the country's relative power has deteriorated, and policymakers have made dreadful choices concerning which wars to fight and how to fight them. What's more, the Pentagon has come to depend on continuous infusions of cash simply to retain its current force structure -- levels of spending that the Great Recession and the United States' ballooning debt have rendered unsustainable.

It is time to abandon the United States' hegemonic strategy and replace it with one of restraint. This approach would mean giving up on global reform and sticking to protecting narrow national security interests. It would mean transforming the military into a smaller force that goes to war only when it truly must. It would mean

removing large numbers of U.S. troops from forward bases, creating incentives for allies to provide for their own security. And because such a shift would allow the United States to spend its resources on only the most pressing international threats, it would help preserve the country's prosperity and security over the long run.

ACTION AND REACTION

The United States emerged from the Cold War as the single most powerful state in modern times, a position that its diversified and immensely productive economy supports. Although its share of world economic output will inevitably shrink as other countries catch up, the United States will continue for many years to rank as one of the top two or three economies in the world. The United States' per capita GDP stands at \$48,000, more than five times as large as China's, which means that the U.S. economy can produce cutting-edge products for a steady domestic market. North America is blessed with enviable quantities of raw materials, and about 29 percent of U.S. trade flows to and from its immediate neighbors, Canada and Mexico. The fortuitous geostrategic position of the United States compounds these economic advantages. Its neighbors to the north and south possess only miniscule militaries. Vast oceans to the west and east separate it from potential rivals. And its thousands of nuclear weapons deter other countries from ever entertaining an invasion.

Ironically, however, instead of relying on these inherent advantages for its security, the United States has acted with a profound sense of insecurity, adopting an unnecessarily militarized and forward-leaning foreign policy. That strategy has generated predictable pushback. Since the 1990s, rivals have resorted to what scholars call "soft balancing" -- low-grade diplomatic opposition. China and Russia regularly use the rules of liberal international institutions to delegitimize the United States' actions. In the UN Security Council, they wielded their veto power to deny the West resolutions supporting the bombing campaign in Kosovo in 1999 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and more recently, they have slowed the effort to isolate Syria. They occasionally work together in other venues, too, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Although the Beijing-Moscow relationship is unimpressive compared with military alliances such as NATO, it's remarkable that it exists at all given the long history of border friction and hostility between the two countries. As has happened so often in history, the common threat posed by a greater power has driven unnatural partners to cooperate.

American activism has also generated harder forms of balancing. China has worked assiduously to improve its military, and Russia has sold it modern weapons, such as fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, and diesel-electric submarines. Iran and North Korea, meanwhile, have pursued nuclear programs in part to neutralize the United States' overwhelming advantages in conventional fighting power. Some of this pushback would have occurred no matter what; in an anarchic global system, states acquire the allies and military power that help them look after themselves. But a country as large and as active as the United States intensifies these responses.

Such reactions will only grow stronger as emerging economies convert their wealth into military power. Even though the economic and technological capacities of China and India may never equal those of the United States, the gap is destined to narrow. China already has the potential to be a serious competitor. At the peak of the Cold War, in the mid-1970s, Soviet GDP, in terms of purchasing power parity, amounted to 57 percent of U.S. GDP. China reached 75 percent of the U.S. level in 2011, and according to the International Monetary Fund, it is projected to match it by 2017. Of course, Chinese output must support four times as many people, which limits what the country can extract for military purposes, but it still provides enough resources to hinder U.S. foreign policy. Meanwhile, Russia, although a shadow of its former Soviet self, is no longer the hapless weakling it was

in the 1990s. Its economy is roughly the size of the United Kingdom's or France's, it has plenty of energy resources to export, and it still produces some impressive weapons systems.

FIGHTING IDENTITY

Just as emerging powers have gotten stronger, so, too, have the small states and violent substate entities that the United States has attempted to discipline, democratize, or eliminate. Whether in Somalia, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Libya, the U.S. military seems to find itself fighting enemies that prove tougher than expected. (Consider the fact that Washington spent as much in real terms on the war in Iraq as it did on the war in Vietnam, even though the Iraqi insurgents enjoyed little external support, whereas China and the Soviet Union lent major support to the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese.) Yet Washington seems unable to stay out of conflicts involving substate entities, in part because their elemental nature assaults the internationalist values that U.S. grand strategy is committed to preserving. Having trumpeted the United States' military superiority, U.S. policymakers have a hard time saying no to those who argue that the country's prestige will suffer gravely if the world's leader lets wars great and small run their course.

The enduring strength of these substate groups should give American policymakers pause, since the United States' current grand strategy entails open-ended confrontation with nationalism and other forms of identity politics that insurgents and terrorists feed off of. These forces provide the organizing energy for groups competing for power within countries (as in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq), for secessionist movements (as in Kosovo), and for terrorists who oppose the liberal world order (mainly al Qaeda). Officials in Washington, however, have acted as if they can easily undercut the power of identity through democratic processes, freedom of information, and economic development, helped along by the judicious application of military power. In fact, identity is resilient, and foreign peoples react with hostility to outsiders trying to control their lives.

The Iraq war has been a costly case in point. Officials in the Bush administration convinced themselves that a quick application of overwhelming military power would bring democracy to Iraq, produce a subsequent wave of democratization across the Arab world, marginalize al Qaeda, and secure U.S. influence in the region. Instead, Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds stoked the violence that the United States labored to suppress, and Shiite and Sunni factions fought not only each other but also the U.S. military. Today's Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad has proved neither democratic nor effective. Sunni terrorists have continued to carry out attacks. The Kurdish parts of Iraq barely acknowledge their membership in the larger state.

By now, it is clear that the United States has worn out its welcome in Afghanistan, too. The Taliban continue to resist the U.S. presence, drawing their strength largely from Pashtun nationalism, and members of the Afghan security forces have, in growing numbers, murdered U.S. and other NATO soldiers who were there to assist them. Instead of simply punishing the Taliban for their indirect role in 9/11 and hitting al Qaeda as hard as possible, true to its global agenda, the Bush administration pursued a costly and futile effort to transform Afghanistan, and the Obama administration continued it.

FRIENDS WITHOUT BENEFITS

Another problematic response to the United States' grand strategy comes from its friends: free-riding. The Cold War alliances that the country has worked so hard to maintain -- namely, NATO and the U.S.-Japanese security agreement -- have provided U.S. partners in Europe and Asia with such a high level of insurance that they have

been able to steadily shrink their militaries and outsource their defense to Washington. European nations have cut their military spending by roughly 15 percent in real terms since the end of the Cold War, with the exception of the United Kingdom, which will soon join the rest as it carries out its austerity policy. Depending on how one counts, Japanese defense spending has been cut, or at best has remained stable, over the past decade. The government has unwisely devoted too much spending to ground forces, even as its leaders have expressed alarm at the rise of Chinese military power -- an air, missile, and naval threat.

Although these regions have avoided major wars, the United States has had to bear more and more of the burden of keeping the peace. It now spends 4.6 percent of its GDP on defense, whereas its European NATO allies collectively spend 1.6 percent and Japan spends 1.0 percent. With their high per capita GDPs, these allies can afford to devote more money to their militaries, yet they have no incentive to do so. And so while the U.S. government considers draconian cuts in social spending to restore the United States' fiscal health, it continues to subsidize the security of Germany and Japan. This is welfare for the rich.

U.S. security guarantees also encourage plucky allies to challenge more powerful states, confident that Washington will save them in the end -- a classic case of moral hazard. This phenomenon has caused the United States to incur political costs, antagonizing powers great and small for no gain and encouraging them to seek opportunities to provoke the United States in return. So far, the United States has escaped getting sucked into unnecessary wars, although Washington dodged a bullet in Taiwan when the Democratic Progressive Party of Chen Shui-bian governed the island, from 2000 to 2008. His frequent allusions to independence, which ran counter to U.S. policy but which some Bush administration officials reportedly encouraged, unnecessarily provoked the Chinese government; had he proceeded, he would have surely triggered a dangerous crisis. Chen would never have entertained such reckless rhetoric absent the long-standing backing of the U.S. government.

The Philippines and Vietnam (the latter of which has no formal defense treaty with Washington) also seem to have figured out that they can needle China over maritime boundary disputes and then seek shelter under the U.S. umbrella when China inevitably reacts. Not only do these disputes make it harder for Washington to cooperate with Beijing on issues of global importance; they also risk roping the United States into conflicts over strategically marginal territory.

Georgia is another state that has played this game to the United States' detriment. Overly confident of Washington's affection for it, the tiny republic deliberately challenged Russia over control of the disputed region of South Ossetia in August 2008. Regardless of how exactly the fighting began, Georgia acted far too adventurously given its size, proximity to Russia, and distance from any plausible source of military help. This needless war ironically made Russia look tough and the United States unreliable.

This dynamic is at play in the Middle East, too. Although U.S. officials have communicated time and again to leaders in Jerusalem their discomfort with Israeli settlements on the territory occupied during the 1967 war, Israel regularly increases the population and dimensions of those settlements. The United States' military largess and regular affirmations of support for Israel have convinced Israeli hawks that they will suffer no consequences for ignoring U.S. advice. It takes two to make peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the creation of humiliating facts on the ground will not bring a negotiated settlement any closer. And Israel's policies toward the Palestinians are a serious impediment to improved U.S. relations with the Arab world.

A NIMBLER STRATEGY

The United States should replace its unnecessary, ineffective, and expensive hegemonic quest with a more restrained grand strategy. Washington should not retreat into isolationism but refocus its efforts on its three biggest security challenges: preventing a powerful rival from upending the global balance of power, fighting terrorists, and limiting nuclear proliferation. These challenges are not new, but the United States must develop more carefully calculated and discriminating policies to address them.

For roughly a century, American strategists have striven to ensure that no single state dominated the giant landmass of Eurasia, since such a power could then muster the resources to threaten the United States directly. To prevent this outcome, the United States rightly went to war against Germany and Japan and contained the Soviet Union. Although China may ultimately try to assume the mantle of Eurasian hegemon, this outcome is neither imminent nor inevitable. China's economy still faces many pitfalls, and the country is surrounded by powerful states that could and would check its expansion, including India and Russia, both of which have nuclear weapons. Japan, although it underspends on defense today, is rich and technologically advanced enough to contribute to a coalition of states that could balance against China. Other maritime Asian countries, even without the United States as a backstop, could also make common cause against China. The United States should maintain the capability to assist them if need be. But it should proceed cautiously in order to ensure that its efforts do not unnecessarily threaten China and thus encourage the very ambitions Washington hopes to deter or prompt a new round of free-riding or reckless driving by others in Asia.

The United States must also defend itself against al Qaeda and any similar successor groups. Since such terrorists can threaten Americans' lives, the U.S. government should keep in place the prudent defensive measures that have helped lower the risk of attacks, such as more energetic intelligence efforts and better airport security. (A less interventionist foreign policy will help, too: it was partly the U.S. military's presence in Saudi Arabia that radicalized Osama bin Laden and his followers in the first place.) When it comes to offense, the United States must still pursue terrorists operating abroad, so that they spend their scarce resources trying to stay alive rather than plotting new attacks. It will need to continue cooperating with other vulnerable governments and help them develop their own police and military forces. Occasionally, the U.S. military will have to supplement these efforts with air strikes, drone attacks, and special operations raids.

But Washington should keep the threat in perspective. Terrorists are too weak to threaten the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity, or power position. Because the threat is modest, and because trying to reform other societies by force is too costly, the United States must fight terrorism with carefully applied force, rather than through wholesale nation-building efforts such as that in Afghanistan.

Finally, a restrained grand strategy would also pay close attention to the spread of nuclear weapons, while relying less on the threat of military force to stop it. Thanks to the deterrence provided by its own massive nuclear forces, the United States faces little risk of a direct nuclear attack by another state. But Washington does need to keep nonstate actors from obtaining nuclear weapons or material. To prevent them from taking advantage of lax safeguards at nuclear facilities, the U.S. government should share best practices regarding nuclear security with other countries, even ones that it would prefer did not possess nuclear weapons in the first place. The United States does already cooperate somewhat with Pakistan on this issue, but it must stand ready to do more and ultimately to undertake such efforts with others.

The loss of a government's control over its nuclear weapons during a coup, revolution, or civil war is a far harder problem to forestall. It may be possible for U.S. forces to secure weapons in a period of instability, with the help of local actors who see the dangers for their own country if the weapons get loose. Conditions may lend themselves to a preventive military attack, to seize or disable the weapons. In some cases, however, the United States might have to make do with less sure-fire responses. It could warn those who seized the nuclear weapons in a period of upheaval that they would make themselves targets for retaliation if the weapons were ever used by terrorists. And it could better surveil international sea and air routes and more intensively monitor both its own borders for nuclear smuggling and those of the potential source countries.

These measures may seem incommensurate with the terrible toll of a nuclear blast. But the alternative strategy -- fighting preventive conventional wars against nascent nuclear powers -- is an expensive and uncertain solution to proliferation. The Obama administration's oft-repeated warning that deterrence and containment of a nuclear Iran is unacceptable makes little sense given the many ways a preventive war could go wrong and in light of the redundant deterrent capability the United States already possesses. Indeed, the more Washington relies on military force to halt proliferation, the more likely it is that countries will decide to acquire the ultimate deterrent.

A more restrained America would also have to head off nuclear arms races. In retrospect, the size, composition, doctrine, and highly alert posture of U.S. and Soviet nuclear forces during the Cold War seem unduly risky relative to the strategic problem those weapons were supposed to solve. Nuclear weapons act as potent deterrents to aggression, but significantly smaller forces than those the United States now possesses, carefully managed, should do the job. To avoid a replay of Cold War-style nuclear competition, the United States should pursue a new multilateral arms control regime that places ceilings on nuclear inventories and avoids hair-trigger force postures.

RESTRAINT IN PRACTICE

A grand strategy of restraint would narrow U.S. foreign policy to focus on those three larger objectives. What would it look like in practice? First, the United States would recast its alliances so that other countries shared actual responsibility for their own defense. NATO is the easiest case; the United States should withdraw from the military command structure and return the alliance to the primarily political organization it once was. The Europeans can decide for themselves whether they want to retain the military command structure under the auspices of the European Union or dismantle it altogether. Most U.S. troops should come home from Europe, although by mutual agreement, the United States could keep a small number of naval and air bases on the continent.

The security treaty with Japan is a more difficult problem; it needs to be renegotiated but not abandoned. As the treaty stands now, the United States shoulders most of the burden of defending Japan, and the Japanese government agrees to help. The roles should be reversed, so that Japan assumes responsibility for its own defense, with Washington offering backup. Given concerns about China's rising power, not all U.S. forces should leave the region. But the Pentagon should pare down its presence in Japan to those relevant to the most immediate military problems. All U.S. marines could be withdrawn from the country, bringing to an end the thorny negotiations about their future on the island of Okinawa. The U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force should keep the bulk of their forces stationed in and around Japan in place, but with appropriate reductions. Elsewhere

in Asia, the U.S. military can cooperate with other states to ensure access to the region should future crises arise, but it should not seek new permanent bases.

The military should also reassess its commitments in the Persian Gulf: the United States should help protect states in the region against external attacks, but it cannot take responsibility for defending them against internal dissent. Washington still needs to reassure those governments that fear that a regional power such as Iran will attack them and hijack their oil wealth, since a single oil-rich hegemon in the region would no doubt be a source of mischief. The U.S. military has proved adept at preventing such an outcome in the past, as it did when it defended Saudi Arabia and repelled Saddam's forces from Kuwait in 1991. Ground forces bent on invasion make easy targets for air attacks. The aircraft and cruise missiles aboard U.S. naval forces stationed in the region could provide immediate assistance. With a little advance notice, U.S. Air Force aircraft could quickly reinforce land bases maintained by the Arab states of the Gulf, as they did during the Gulf War when the regional powers opposed to Saddam's aggression prepared the way for reinforcement from the U.S. military by maintaining extra base capacity and fuel.

But U.S. soldiers no longer need to live onshore in Gulf countries, where they incite anti-Americanism and tie the U.S. government to autocratic regimes of dubious legitimacy. For example, Bahrain is suffering considerable internal unrest, which raises questions about the future viability of the United States' growing military presence there. The Iraq war proved that trying to install new regimes in Arab countries is a fool's errand; defending existing regimes facing internal rebellion will be no easier.

Under a restrained grand strategy, U.S. military forces could shrink significantly, both to save money and to send allies the message that it's time they did more for themselves. Because the Pentagon would, under this new strategy, swear off counterinsurgency, it could cut the number of ground forces in half. The navy and the air force, meanwhile, should be cut by only a quarter to a third, since their assets take a long time to produce and would still be needed for any effort to maintain the global balance of power. Naval and air forces are also well suited to solving the security problems of Asia and the Persian Gulf. Because these forces are highly mobile, only some need be present in key regions. The rest can be kept at home, as a powerful strategic reserve.

The overall size and quality of U.S. military forces should be determined by the critical contingency that they must address: the defense of key resources and allies against direct attack. Too often in the past, Washington has overused its expensive military to send messages that ought to be left to diplomats. That must change. Although the Pentagon should continue leading joint exercises with the militaries of other countries in key regions, it should stop overloading the calendar with pointless exercises the world over. Making that change would save wear and tear on troops and equipment and avoid creating the impression that the United States will solve all the world's security problems.

LETTING GO

Shifting to a more restrained global stance would yield meaningful benefits for the United States, saving lives and resources and preventing pushback, provided Washington makes deliberate and prudent moves now to prepare its allies to take on the responsibility for their own defense. Scaling down the U.S. military's presence over a decade would give partners plenty of time to fortify their own militaries and develop the political and diplomatic machinery to look after their own affairs. Gradual disengagement would also reduce the chances of

creating security vacuums, which opportunistic regional powers might try to fill.

U.S. allies, of course, will do everything they can to persuade Washington to keep its current policies in place. Some will promise improvements to their military forces that they will then abandon when it is convenient. Some will claim there is nothing more they can contribute, that their domestic political and economic constraints matter more than America's. Others will try to divert the discussion to shared values and principles. Still others will hint that they will bandwagon with strong neighbors rather than balance against them. A few may even threaten to turn belligerent.

U.S. policymakers will need to remain cool in the face of such tactics and keep in mind that these wealthy allies are unlikely to surrender their sovereignty to regional powers. Indeed, history has shown that states more often balance against the powerful than bandwagon with them. As for potential adversaries, the United States can continue to deter actions that threaten its vital interests by defining those interests narrowly, stating them clearly, and maintaining enough military power to protect them.

Of course, the United States could do none of these things and instead continue on its present track, wasting resources and earning the enmity of some states and peoples while infantilizing others. Perhaps current economic and geopolitical trends will reverse themselves, and the existing strategy will leave Washington comfortably in the driver's seat, with others eager to live according to its rules. But if the U.S. debt keeps growing and power continues to shift to other countries, some future economic or political crisis could force Washington to switch course abruptly, compelling friendly and not-so-friendly countries to adapt suddenly. That seems like the more dangerous path.

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