

FOREIGN AND DEFENSE POLICY

29. **Foreign Policy**

America's security policy is adrift without a rudder in a turbulent post-Cold War world. The Clinton administration has shown little understanding of the need for a balance between military capabilities and military commitments. Even worse, the administration has failed to comprehend that even an economic and military superpower like the United States cannot police the world. Prussian leader Frederick the Great once warned that he who attempts to defend everything defends nothing. U.S. security policy exhibits precisely that defect.

Instead of continuing to pursue an expensive and dangerous policy of global **interventionism**, the United States has the opportunity to adopt a new approach: strategic independence. That new policy would mean that U.S. military forces would be used solely for the defense of America's vital security interests. Implementing strategic independence would entail the following changes:

- **The United States should refuse to participate militarily in United Nations' peacekeeping operations.**
- **U.S. Cold War era alliance commitments should be phased out before the end of the decade.**
- **The United States should explicitly reject a global policing role, whether unilateral, in combination with regional allies, or through the United Nations.**
- **The United States should adopt the role of balancer of last resort in the international system instead of being the intervener of first resort.**
- **The U.S. military budget should be reduced to \$140 billion (1995 dollars) over a five-year period.**

America's Strategic Overextension

The Clinton administration shows a disturbing inability to discriminate between those developments in the international system that are essential

to America's security and those that are peripheral or irrelevant. U.S. policymakers act as though everything, everywhere is important. Thus the administration has preserved all of **Washington's** Cold War era security obligations and has even sought to upgrade some of them, most notably the mission of policing the Persian Gulf region. The administration has also sought to add new security commitments, for example, proposing to enlarge NATO to include the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. And it has involved the United States in multilateral peacekeeping and nation-building missions in such places as Somalia and Haiti. The result is, inevitably, strategic overextension.

Such an approach is unnecessary as well as undesirable. Given the absence of a superpower adversary, the United States has no need to continue subsidizing the defense of allies in Western Europe and East Asia. They have the population and economic resources to build whatever military forces are needed to protect themselves from lesser threats, but they prefer to rely on the United States. Just as domestic **welfare** expenditures foster an unhealthy dependent mentality on the part of recipients, so do international military welfare subsidies.

Preserving **Washington's** Cold War era alliances makes little sense from the standpoint of American interests, but expanding those commitments is especially unwise. Proposals to enlarge NATO, for example, would entangle the United States in the myriad disputes of Central and Eastern Europe. It would fatally undercut the position of Russia's democratic faction and give the **ultranationalists** an ideal issue to exploit; it would risk a confrontation with Moscow over a region in which Russia has political, economic, and security interests going back generations or centuries; and it would involve the United States in quarrels and conflicts among the Central and East European nations themselves.

America's legitimate European interests do not warrant such risks. The primary interest of the United States is to prevent a hostile power from dominating the Continent and thereby posing a serious threat to **America's** own security. Such a danger is utterly improbable for the foreseeable future. In any case, it is imperative to distinguish between a conflict that threatens to undermine the European balance of power and the assortment of petty conflicts now taking place in portions of Eastern Europe that have little relevance outside the immediate region. For the United States to become entangled in such wars would be a misguided attempt to **micromanage** the **Continent's** security.

Defining *Vital Interests*

The European example illustrates a larger point. U.S. policymakers must be more cautious and discriminating about the concept of vital interests. When President Clinton contended that the United States had vital interests at stake in Haiti—and cited the desire to promote democracy in the Western Hemisphere as an example—he demonstrated that he had no grasp of the concept.

To constitute a vital U.S. interest, a development must have a direct, immediate, and substantial connection to America's physical survival, political independence, or domestic liberty. Anything that does not reach that threshold is a secondary or peripheral interest—or, in many cases, not a valid interest at all. It is also important to stress that "vital" means essential or indispensable, not merely relevant or desirable. Democracy in Haiti and elsewhere in the hemisphere is indeed desirable, but it is hardly indispensable to America's well-being. Indeed, on numerous occasions, there have been dictatorships in Haiti and other Caribbean and Latin American countries that had no discernible adverse impact on the security of the United States.

The concept of a vital interest also has an operational definition. A vital interest is something for which the United States must be prepared to fight a major war. That sobering factor alone should be enough to discourage U.S. policymakers from using the term in a casual fashion or making security commitments that the United States would be unwise to fulfill.

The Significance of the Demise of the Soviet Threat

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union did not change the nature of America's vital interests, it did radically alter the global threat environment. During the Cold War it was possible to argue that conflicts that appeared to have only local or regional importance were in fact much more significant because they frequently involved Soviet surrogates. Whatever validity that argument may have had, it is no longer relevant. Without the Soviet factor, most present conflicts are entirely parochial. They may be of importance to the parties involved—and perhaps to neighboring states—but they have no serious potential to menace the United States.

The demise of the Soviet threat altered the threat environment in another important way. Throughout the Cold War the conventional wisdom held that only the United States could neutralize the military threat posed by another superpower. That argument was probably overdone even during

the Cold War. Although no single nation other than the United States had the wherewithal to counter the power of the USSR, an alliance of several medium-sized nations might well have been able to do so. In particular, the major countries of Western Europe, once they had recovered from the devastation of World War n, should have been capable of containing Soviet expansionism—at least in Europe.

In any case, the argument has no relevance today. There is no superpower threat, and regional powers are fully capable of neutralizing lesser threats without the aid of the United States. The notion that the European Union, whose members have a collective population of more than 370 million, a gross domestic product of \$7 trillion a year, and more than 2 million troops, cannot contain Serb expansionism strains credulity. Similarly, the argument that Japan, South Korea, Russia, China, and the other powers of East Asia cannot handle North Korea should not be taken seriously. Americans who contend that only the United States can solve such problems exhibit a disturbing national hubris. The leaders of other countries who do so merely want the United States to continue assuming an unwarranted portion of the costs and risks of international security.

America should position itself as the "balancer of last resort" in the international system. In other words, the United States should maintain sufficient forces to backstop the efforts of other powers if an unusually potent expansionist threat were to emerge and those powers were unable to contain it with their own resources. Such a breakdown of regional containment efforts is rare, and given the absence of any credible global hegemonic threat comparable to that of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, the need for the United States to play the balancer role in the foreseeable future is highly improbable.

Avoiding Unnecessary UN Entanglements

A security strategy based on the defense of vital American interests would leave no room for participating in peacekeeping or nation-building enterprises directed by the United Nations. The Clinton administration has retreated somewhat from its initial enthusiasm for UN military missions. At one time the administration considered contributing U.S. troops to a permanent UN peacekeeping force and seemed willing to subordinate U.S. military personnel to UN command. The ineptitude that the United Nations displayed in conducting its missions in Somalia and Bosnia has apparently caused administration officials to advocate a more cautious policy.

Nevertheless, the administration remains too willing to commit U.S. troops to dubious UN missions that have little relevance to the security of the United States. The debacle in Somalia was a warning of the dangers inherent in becoming involved in such operations. Yet the administration indicates that the United States is willing to provide forces, perhaps including ground troops, to extricate UN peacekeepers from Bosnia if that mission is terminated. Such an intervention could result in casualties substantially in excess of the 30 American troops killed in Somalia.

In addition to the costs and risks, the United States should reject involvement in UN peacekeeping operations for another reason. It is important to maximize America's decisionmaking autonomy. An interventionist policy within a global collective security arrangement may be the worst of all possible options. Unilateral interventionism at least leaves U.S. officials the latitude to determine when, where, and under what conditions to use the nation's armed forces. Working through the UN Security Council to reach such decisions reduces that flexibility and creates another layer of risk. That is especially true if Washington is serious about collaborating in collective security operations and does not merely seek to use the United Nations as a multilateral facade for U.S. objectives. Other powers are going to insist on quid pro quos for supporting measures desired by Washington. The calls by Britain and France, Western Europe's two permanent members on the Security Council, for the United States to assume its "fair share" of the risks in the UN's Bosnia peacekeeping mission are an omen of such pressures.

Rejecting the "Light-Switch" Model of U.S. Engagement

Whenever anyone suggests aggressively pruning Washington's overgrown global security commitments, defenders of the status quo invariably cry "isolationism." That view is essentially the light-switch theory of America's relationship with the world—that there can be only two possible positions, off or on. Either the United States continues pursuing an indiscriminate global interventionist policy that requires American military personnel to be put at risk in such places as Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia, or we adopt a "Fortress America" strategy and "cut ourselves off from the world."

That contention is a red herring. No serious analyst advocates creating a hermit republic. It is entirely possible to adopt a security policy between the extremes of global interventionism—which is essentially the current U.S. policy—and Fortress America. Moreover, there are different forms

of engagement in the world, of which the political-military version is merely one. Economic connections and influence are **crucial**—and seem to be growing in importance. Diplomatic and cultural engagement is also significant, especially in the age of the information revolution.

There is no reason the United States must have identical positions along each axis of engagement. It is entirely feasible to have extensive economic and cultural relations with the rest of the world and to have an active and creative diplomacy without playing the role of world military policeman. It is only in the area of military engagement that the United States needs to retrench.

*A Security Policy for a **Constitutional Republic***

A policy of strategic independence is based on a more modest and sustainable world role for the United States. It takes into account the fundamental changes that have occurred in the world in recent years and seeks to position the United States to benefit from an emerging **multipolar** political, economic, and military environment. It would end the promiscuously interventionist policy that requires a military budget larger than those of all other industrial powers *combined* and that has placed American military personnel at risk in such strategically irrelevant places as Somalia and Haiti. A new security strategy would enable the United States to reduce its military budget to \$140 billion over a five-year period and cut its military force to 850,000 active-duty personnel while more than adequately protecting national security.

Strategic independence would be a policy consistent with the values of a constitutional republic based on the principle of limited government. The lives, freedoms, and financial resources of the American people are not rightfully available for whatever missions suit the whims of political leaders. The U.S. government has a constitutional and moral responsibility to protect the security and liberty of the American Republic. It does not have either a constitutional or moral writ to risk lives and resources to police the planet, promote democracy, or advance other aims on the foreign policy bureaucracy's agenda. A Congress dedicated to the principle of limited government needs to reform **Washington's hyperactivist** and over-extended global role.

Suggested Readings

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