CATO HANDBOOK FOR CONGRESS

Policy Recommendations for the 108th Congress

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47. U.S. Security Strategy

Congress should

- act as a much-needed check on the executive branch's reflexive tendency to expand the global political and military role of the United States under the guise of U.S. ''global leadership'' or the U.S. war on terrorism,
- initiate a comprehensive review of existing U.S. security commitments and jettison those that are not clearly linked to vital national security interests,
- review the defense budget and make the necessary reductions to bring it in line with a security strategy that is based on the defense of vital national security interests, and
- refuse to provide funding for military interventions except when such an intervention is a necessary response to a national security threat.

Since September 11, 2001, it has been easy and tempting to define U.S. national security strategy solely in terms of the terrorist threat. Some observers would fill the vacuum in the threat environment left by the demise of the Soviet Union by focusing on al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. But such thinking would simply be falling back on Cold War habits. Instead of focusing solely on terrorism, the United States needs to formulate a viable national security posture to address the greatly changed strategic environment, of which the terrorist threat is only one component.

In the 21st century, instead of devoting tremendous national resources—blood and treasure—to defending the entire world against all manner of threats, the United States should behave as a normal great power. Like any great power, the United States must vigorously protect its vital national security interests using many means, including force. Absent a hegemonic

threat, such as the Soviet Union, however, the United States should be able to rise above most day-to-day turmoil around the globe.

Instead of curtailing Cold War–era overseas security commitments, the United States has assumed significant new ones under the mantle of U.S. ''global leadership.'' Much of the Persian Gulf region has become a de facto U.S. military protectorate, and the enlarged NATO obligates the United States to defend 19 countries (up from 16) as if they were U.S. territory. Another round of NATO expansion, which makes the first look modest, is in the offing. The United States is also increasingly immersed in parochial regional conflicts, most notably in the Balkans—where Washington's preoccupation with Kosovo adds to the burden undertaken in Bosnia with the ill-conceived Dayton accords.

The war on terrorism is the most recent example of not focusing on the core threats to vital U.S. security interests. What started as a war against terrorists with global reach (i.e., the al-Qaeda terrorist network responsible for the September 11 attacks) has morphed into a larger war against terrorism in general (even terrorist groups that do not focus their attacks against the United States) and ''rogue states'' seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

U.S. "Global Leadership" and Strategic Overextension

The United States cannot solve all the world's problems or rid the world of evil. It cannot act as the world's armed social worker—taking responsibility for rehabilitating the rest of world by redressing human rights violations, humanitarian disasters, and the absence of democracy wherever such blight offends American sensibilities. And the United States cannot exterminate terrorism.

Nor can the United States be the global cop. Washington is not the arbiter of law and order throughout the world, even when it comes to such matters as weapons proliferation or the activities of the ''axis of evil'' (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea) and other ''rogue states.''

Policymakers and politicians often call upon the United States to play each of those roles or, more ominously, both. Republicans and Democrats alike call upon the United States to show ''global leadership''—suggesting that the United States is responsible to some degree for everyone, everywhere. Even the most ardent internationalists may not necessarily believe that. But basing U.S. national security strategy on a mission to lead the world clearly results in making all crises and conflicts important rather than deciding which situations demand Washington's attention and which

can be left to run their course. It is a prescription for strategic overextension, inconsistency, and hypocrisy.

September 11 only further highlights the need for the United States to distance itself from problems that are not vital to U.S. national security. Much of the anti-American resentment around the world—particularly in the Islamic world—is the result of interventionist U.S. foreign policy. The more the United States meddles in the internal affairs of other countries and regions, the more likely such actions will be to fuel extreme hatred of the United States. Such hatred is a steppingstone to violence, including terrorism. The Bush administration even admits the relationship between American ''global presence and engagement'' and retaliatory acts of terrorism against the United States. Therefore, the United States would actually be more secure if it became less involved in other people's problems.

Making Promises Washington Cannot Keep

Put simply, the United States is incapable of keeping many of the commitments it has made. Moreover, there was no credible strategic rationale for assuming most of those obligations in the first place. That recklessness has been expensive, and the costs are sure to rise unless major adjustments are made.

The potential military implications of making empty promises (or threats) are obvious. When the United States intervened in Somalia, pledging to create stability amidst cruel urban warfare, it quickly became apparent that U.S. troops had undertaken a mission without adequate resources. American soldiers lacked both physical equipment suitable for such warfare and, perhaps even more serious, Washington's political backing to succeed in their mission. One of the more gruesome results was the ambush that killed 18 U.S. Army Rangers in the streets of Mogadishu. Pressure immediately built to withdraw U.S. forces. When the high costs—both financial and human—of such commitments become apparent, the American public is unwilling to support interventions that do not involve U.S. vital interests.

Even in the war on terrorism, the United States is flirting with involvement in situations that entail nonvital interests. The U.S. involvement in the Philippines and in the Republic of Georgia provides two examples. The U.S. military is aiding the Philippine government in dealing with the Abu Sayef guerrillas, who are not so much terrorists as financially motivated kidnappers. Even Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo admits that there ceased to be evidence of al-Qaeda in the Philippines

after 1995. The U.S. plan to train and equip the Georgian military is based on the belief that al-Qaeda members and other Islamic extremists from Chechnya have taken refuge in the Pankisi Gorge region along the Georgia-Chechnya border. But such terrorists are Russia's problem more than America's. And clearly the Georgian government is using the pretext of terrorism to invite the U.S. military to protect the country against Russia (which supported the U.S.-led military effort in Afghanistan) and its influence over Georgian provinces seeking independence and closer ties to Russia.

Instead of focusing on mopping up the remnants of al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan, the U.S. military presence there has moved dangerously close to peacekeeping and nation-building operations. The military mission now seems to be focused on protecting Afghan president Hamid Karzai and keeping his government in power. That is a prescription for disaster. In the end, it is impossible for an intervening party's actions (no matter how well-intentioned) to not alter the power calculations of all the rival factions. Invariably, the outside party will do something that is seen as benefiting one side's interests at the expense of all others' interests. And the outside party then becomes a target for violence. The United States needs to learn from and not repeat what happened in Lebanon in the 1980s and Somalia in the 1990s.

Pursuing a policy of intervention anywhere and everywhere has concrete costs that the United States can ill afford. The budget for national defense—approximately $400 billion in fiscal year 2003—is one of the most obvious financial costs. In real terms, today's budget is greater than the average budget during the Cold War and costs about $1,400 per year for every American man, woman, and child. Much of that sum can be attributed to Washington's overambitious national security posture.

The human costs must also be considered. Impressive military spending is not always enough to maintain a stance of global military leadership—sometimes U.S. troops will have to be put at risk to prove U.S. prowess. Americans will die for purposes far less important than U.S. security.

Alleged Benefits of U.S. Political and Military Leadership

Proponents of the U.S. crusade to lead the world point to several purported benefits of that policy. One of the most persistent myths is that—by assuming responsibility for leading the world—the United States is able to persuade other countries to share the costs of initiatives that it would otherwise have to bear alone. The Gulf War is the preeminent

example of such alleged burden sharing. Yet the United States offered concrete economic or political rewards to many key countries to encourage their participation in the coalition against Iraq. Moreover, Washington today continues to pay about $80 billion per year to defend Saudi Arabia and the other wealthy southern Persian Gulf states. The Europeans buy far more oil from this region than does the United States but do little to help defend it. The price tag for defending the region clearly eclipses any temporary burden sharing that occurred back in 1991. Washington's willingness to assume responsibility for security in many parts of the world—not only in the Persian Gulf region but in East Asia and Europe as well—encourages free riding, not burden sharing.

More important, the United States does not need to defend Persian Gulf oil at all. The oil market has changed dramatically since the 1970s. (Even then, oil shortages reduced the nation's gross domestic product by less than half of 1 percent.) New technology has allowed new sources of oil to be tapped and increased the efficiency of its usage. As a result, the Persian Gulf supplies less of the world's oil than it did during the 1970s. In addition, the U.S. economy is much less vulnerable to oil shocks than it was in the 1970s: the United States spent 9 percent of its gross domestic product on oil in the 1970s; today it spends only 3 percent, and the economy can more easily shift to other fuels. Even at the time of the Gulf War, prominent economists from across the political spectrum cautioned that defending oil was not a justification for war. That argument is even stronger today.

Another rationale for attempting to manage global security is that a world without U.S. hegemony would soon degenerate into a tangle of chaos and instability, in which weapons proliferation, genocide, terrorism, and other offensive activities would be rampant. Prophets of such a development hint that if the United States fails to exercise robust political and military leadership today, the world is condemned to repeat the biggest mistakes of the 20th century—or perhaps do something even worse.

Such thinking is seriously flawed. First, instability in the international system is nothing new, and most episodes do not affect U.S. vital interests. Furthermore, to assert that U.S. global leadership can stave off otherwise inevitable global chaos vastly overstates the power of any single country to influence world events. Indeed, many of the problems that plague the world today, such as civil wars and ethnic strife, are largely impervious to external solutions. There is little to back up an assertion that only Washington's management of international security can save the world from political, economic, or military conflagration.

A World without U.S. Intervention

If Washington renounces world political and military leadership, is the United States condemned to stand idly by while villains and irredentists around the world terrorize helpless populations? It is unfortunate but true that brutal civil or subregional conflicts are likely to mar the future—as they do the present and have the past. Furthermore, there are many parochial wars that simply cannot be settled by outside powers at an acceptable cost to those powers, whether or not the United States claims the mantle of global leadership.

A more critical issue is the evolution of the international system after the United States adopts a policy of strategic independence. Washington can exert considerable, though not complete, influence over how that system develops. A number of different systems may be acceptable to the United States, but two conditions are essential: First, power must be diffuse—that is, not concentrated in the hands of a single state or multinational organization. Second, the system must have a means of checking aspiring hegemons.

Such a system could take several forms. One possibility is to strengthen regional security organizations—both to keep order among member states and to take care of contingencies in their immediate areas. The European Union, with a more robust military capability, would likely be an appropriate organization for promoting security in Europe.

Spheres of influence would also be a possibility. Although that idea sometimes has a sinister connotation, there is nothing inherently wrong with the concept that major powers take an interest and play a major role in affairs in their regions. As long as dominant powers restrict their activities to normal great power behavior—which would generally mean shoring up prestige and security but not expanding their domains—spheres of influence are potentially a valuable means of keeping order in certain regions.

Yet another alternative is the establishment of regional balance-of-power arrangements. This approach would be appropriate in areas where there is no dominant power around which a sphere of influence is likely to develop—such as in the Middle East, where the locus of power tends to shift among the larger states and little enthusiasm exists for a regional security organization.

The United States as Balancer of Last Resort

As long as any international system possesses the two key features mentioned above—diffuse power and a means of checking would-be

hegemons—the United States could tolerate a variety of regional arrangements. As long as no single power or group of powers emerges with the capability and intent of challenging American vital interests, the United States will be reasonably secure. In particular, as long as a hostile hegemon does not have the potential to overrun regions of high economic output—that is, Europe or East Asia—or does not try to interrupt U.S. trade, American vital interests will not be threatened.

To further enhance its security, the United States should always maintain sufficient military strength so that it could reestablish the balance of power if a serious imbalance were to develop. It should, however, act only as a balancer of last resort. The United States should allow smaller-scale shifts and civil strife to be addressed at the regional level. The risks and costs of serving as balancer of last resort are much more manageable than is a quixotic crusade to lead the world.

Suggested Readings

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