

The Cato Institute's foreign policy scholars believe that the United States should engage the world through diplomacy, mutually beneficial trade, and extensive cultural exchange. The use of military force may be warranted when America's vital national security interests are threatened, but only as a last resort. Cato scholars argue that America should model the principles of liberty, democracy, and human rights. We therefore advocate transitioning from our current grand strategy of primacy to one based on restraint. America's global influence is greatest when spread by peaceful means.

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For decades, the United States has played the role of self-appointed world policeman. But as the world changes, the foreign policy establishment continues to cling to obsolete commitments and outdated doctrines based largely on Cold War thinking. A strategy of primacy may once have been warranted, but it is now financially imprudent, strategically unwise, and ultimately unnecessary.

The United States will remain preeminent by virtue of its strong economy and prodigious military capabilities. But with a rising China, a reassertive Russia, and emerging regional rivalries, America's complete dominance over the global order is no longer unchallenged. Admitting that the United States is incapable of thwarting every security threat in every part of the world is hardly tantamount to surrender. It is, rather, a recognition of the new international reality and an acknowledgment of the need to share the burdens, and the responsibilities, of dealing with a complex world. We should, therefore, ask the beneficiaries of today's relatively peaceful and prosperous world order to make a meaningful contribution to maintaining it. The American security umbrella will stay aloft, but others will need to do more.

Transitioning to a world with many capable actors won't be easy. It will require a deft hand to unwind defense arrangements and patience as others find their way. But adopting a grand strategy of restraint would decrease the likelihood of America becoming entangled in foreign conflicts, reduce the budget deficit, and better safeguard Americans' civil liberties.

The United States should maintain its military supremacy, but reducing its permanent overseas presence would allow for substantial reductions in military spending. Some of these resources should be redirected toward increasing our diplomatic capabilities and promoting trade and cultural exchange. Congress, meanwhile, should reassert its constitutional war powers.

America rarely needs to use its military might. Preserving our security should go hand in hand with advancing our prosperity and championing human liberty. America once served as a beacon for others, and human freedom flourishes in many places where U.S. soldiers have never set foot. We should become comfortable again with the many instruments of American power and influence and retain our healthy skepticism of preventive action, which inevitably leads to unintended consequences. We also need a new appreciation for the importance of diplomacy and trade, both of which serve the cause of peace. A strategy guided by restraint would make the United States stronger, more prosperous, and more respected on the world stage.