

RESTORING REALISM AND RESTRAINT IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Policymakers should

- embrace, not squander, the United States' unique geopolitical blessings;
- play hard to get with allies who have more at stake and should be carrying their share;
- realize that the biggest military challenges come from wealthy states with lots of military power; and
- weigh the tradeoffs between the corrosive, anti-republican effects of expansive national security policies against any measurable gains in security.

The United States is the most secure great power in modern history. In a saying attributed to Jean Jules Jusserand, France's ambassador to the United States during World War I, the United States is uniquely blessed with weak neighbors to the north and south and fish to the east and west. Geography insulates the United States from most of the dangers that militaries were designed to defend against.

The "tyranny of distance" about which U.S. Army and Marine commanders regularly complain is actually a blessing, since it works in both directions. These leaders worry that it takes a tremendous amount of effort to get the United States into trouble; but the tyranny of distance also means that trouble must travel a tremendous distance to get to the United States. U.S. policymakers, with their emphasis on so-called forward defense, have worked assiduously to squander this benefit.

Allies and Partners

As early as 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was worrying aloud that U.S. allies in Europe were close to "making a sucker out of Uncle Sam" by

not carrying their share of the burden for defending Europe. Things have gotten much worse with U.S. allies, the world over, since Ike's complaint. America's alliances have grown weaker as they have expanded. In every alliance, the United States is far more important to its allies than its allies are to the United States. And in almost every case, the United States is more important to its allies' defense than their own efforts are.

Unfair defense burdens are baked into U.S. alliances. No amount of whining or cajoling can change it, but that has not stopped U.S. policymakers from whining and cajoling. To take one example, Robert Gates, defense secretary to Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, lamented in 2011 that non-U.S. NATO defense budgets "have been chronically starved for adequate funding for a long time, with the shortfalls compounding on themselves each year," warning of "the very real possibility of collective military irrelevance." Pushing the point further, Gates warned of the prospect of a "dwindling appetite and patience" among Americans to spend resources on behalf of European states "apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defense budgets."

These sorts of complaints, while no doubt cathartic to the policymakers who release them, do nothing to distribute burdens more equitably. This is because at the same time they complain about allied exertions for their own defense, U.S. policymakers go to great lengths to reassure U.S. allies about the strength of the U.S. commitment. There is a zero-sum tradeoff between reassurance and burden sharing. To the extent the allies are sure of the U.S. commitment, they are likely to decline to carry a fairer share of the burden. If allies worry about the strength of the U.S. commitment, they are more likely to do more. Policymakers should square up to this tradeoff. And in cases where allies have the ability to do much more for their own defense, policymakers should stop reassuring so much and even cultivate uncertainty.

Large, Powerful States Are the U.S. Military's Proper Focus

Meanwhile, policymakers have focused their attention for the better part of two decades on one of the world's most backward and strategically unimportant regions: the greater Middle East. U.S. policymakers' fixation on small countries and their troubles has been a grave miscue, for several reasons.

First, the greatest dangers to the United States come from large countries with powerful militaries. If the U.S.-China relationship deteriorates to the extent that some predict, every American would feel the consequences. If China were to dominate East Asia, it would have important consequences for American citizens. By contrast, the problems of small, weak states pose at

worst a limited threat to Americans' way of life. If you want to cause a lot of trouble in international politics, take the helm of a wealthy, powerful state.

Second, the military tools at the United States' disposal are almost completely ineffective for countering terrorists or fixing the myriad problems of weak states. Trying to remake the politics of the Middle East by force, for example, was enormously costly but did not solve the problem of Islamic extremism. The danger posed by Islamist terrorists was vastly overstated in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, but that small danger actually grew in response to the U.S. policies designed to counter the problem. In the words of Kenneth Waltz, "To say that militarily strong states are feeble because they cannot easily bring order to minor states is like saying that a pneumatic hammer is weak because it is not suitable for drilling decayed teeth."

The central problem national security planners should be thinking about is the growth in Chinese military power. That said, China is no juggernaut. Although it possesses an economy much larger relative to the U.S. economy than the Soviet Union's was during the darkest years of the Cold War, it has sizable problems of its own. China has structural economic problems, including a population that is growing much older and lacks meaningful pension systems. At every border, nautical or land, it faces problems, adversaries, or both. China possesses no allies of any import. It has no marketable ideology. Its "wolf warrior" diplomats are often their own worst enemy. Its vaunted foreign development projects frequently involve graft, corruption, misallocation of resources, and alienation of local populations. China blunders at least as badly as the United States blunders.

At the same time, panegyrics about the pacifying effects of economic interdependence are misplaced. It is true that interdependence creates constituencies on both sides that oppose war, but trade is not a firebreak against conflict. Both democracies and autocracies have suffered awful economic costs in pursuit of political objectives they viewed as vital. Moreover, it is unlikely the United States could lead a coalition to punish Chinese misbehavior over Taiwan, for example, in the way it has done to punish Russian misbehavior. China's economic size prevents it from doing so.

As the United States rallies around the Chinese challenge, U.S. allies and partners in Asia are busily sitting on their hands. Japan, Taiwan, and other allies and partners have barely increased their defense exertions as a percentage of economic output. This suggests one or both of two possibilities: either these nations do not see Chinese power as being as dangerous as policymakers in Washington do, or else they are certain that the United States will defend them. Either possibility is bad, and their combination would be worse. No U.S. ally in Asia spends as much of its wealth on defense as the United States does. This reflects the enduring pathology of the U.S. alliance system in Asia.

Asian states threatened by China should be spending more on defense than the United States does. That they are not suggests a conviction that U.S. citizens will handle their defense for them. This is a bad deal for the United States, and it squanders the country's national advantages.

War and Militarism Are Bad for Liberty

Beyond these transactional considerations, policymakers should return to some basic facts about U.S. foreign policy. The expansive strategy both Republicans and Democrats have pursued since the Cold War's end has been corrosive both to small-R republican and small-D democratic values. The country's foreign policy exists to protect the well-being of the citizens who pay for it, not the other way around. That said, the United States is so secure that foreign policy rarely figures prominently in public concerns, even in presidential elections. Foreign policy in the United States is an elite sport.

U.S. foreign policy has barely been democratic in recent years. Too often, U.S. policymakers have viewed citizens with contempt and behaved as though they wished they could dissolve the people and elect another: one more willing to support their grand foreign policy visions. The Biden administration made hay during the 2020 presidential campaign about conducting a "foreign policy for the middle class," then forgot that promise (and the middle class) by embarking on a costly (to the middle class) proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. In foreign policy, tradeoffs are everywhere, and policymakers who try to elide them do a disservice to democratic values. They also seem likely, if they push hard enough, to eventually elicit a response from voters.

Small-R republican values have been similarly gored by the fever dreams of makers of U.S. foreign policy. The republican institutions most closely associated with James Madison are on life support. The one-two punch of the Cold War and then the post-Cold War manias have consolidated power in the executive branch, disgraced the idea of competent congressional oversight, debased core civil liberties, and expanded government spending, bureaucracies, and surveillance. Republican politics at home are impossible for a country that aspires to empire abroad.

Policymakers should jealously guard the geographic advantages the United States possesses; demand more of U.S. allies and make allies worry about the extent of U.S. commitments, not reassure them; focus on the main security challenges that the U.S. military can defend against; and acknowledge the injury that expansive foreign policies do to the democratic and republican values that made America great in the first place.

Suggested Readings

- Blankenship, Brian. "The Price of Protection: Explaining Success and Failure of US Alliance Burden-Sharing Pressure." *Security Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021): 691–724.
- "Debating American Engagement: The Future of U.S. Grand Strategy." *International Security* 38, no. 2 (2013): 181–99.
- Porter, Patrick. *The Global Village Myth: Distance, War, and the Limits of Power*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2015.
- Posen, Barry R. *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014.
- Thrall, A. Trevor, and Benjamin H. Friedman, eds. *U.S. Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for Restraint*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

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