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Lean Forward

In Defense of American Engagement

Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth
January/February 2013

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ESSAY

Pull Back

Barry R. Posen

The United States' undisciplined, expensive, and bloody grand strategy has done untold harm to U.S. national security. It is time to abandon this hegemonic approach and replace it with one of restraint -- giving up on global reform and sticking to protecting narrow national security interests.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Against Activism

Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan

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Since the end of World War II, the United States has pursued a single grand strategy: deep engagement. In an effort to protect its security and prosperity, the country has promoted a liberal economic order and established close defense ties with partners in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. Its military bases cover the map, its ships patrol transit routes across the globe, and tens of thousands of its troops stand guard in allied countries such as Germany, Japan, and South Korea.

The details of U.S. foreign policy have differed from administration to administration, including the emphasis placed on democracy promotion and humanitarian goals, but for over 60 years, every president has agreed on the fundamental decision to remain deeply engaged in the world, even as the rationale for that strategy has

shifted. During the Cold War, the United States' security commitments to Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East served primarily to prevent Soviet encroachment into the world's wealthiest and most resource-rich regions. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the aim has become to make these same regions more secure, and thus less threatening to the United States, and to use these security partnerships to foster the cooperation necessary for a stable and open international order.

Now, more than ever, Washington might be tempted to abandon this grand strategy and pull back from the world. The rise of China is chipping away at the United States' preponderance of power, a budget crisis has put defense spending on the chopping block, and two long wars have left the U.S. military and public exhausted. Indeed, even as most politicians continue to assert their commitment to global leadership, a very different view has taken hold among scholars of international relations over the past decade: that the United States should minimize its overseas military presence, shed its security ties, and give up its efforts to lead the liberal international order.

Proponents of retrenchment argue that a globally engaged grand strategy wastes money by subsidizing the defense of well-off allies and generates resentment among foreign populations and governments. A more modest posture, they contend, would put an end to allies' free-riding and defuse anti-American sentiment. Even if allies did not take over every mission the United States now performs, most of these roles have nothing to do with U.S. security and only risk entrapping the United States in unnecessary wars. In short, those in this camp maintain that pulling back would not only save blood and treasure but also make the United States more secure.

If Washington got out of East Asia, Japan and South Korea would likely expand their military capabilities and go nuclear.

balance against it, becomes overextended, or gets dragged into unnecessary wars.

The benefits of deep engagement, on the other hand, are legion. U.S. security commitments reduce competition in key regions and act as a check against potential rivals. They help maintain an open world economy and give Washington leverage in economic negotiations. And they make it easier for the United States to secure cooperation for combating a wide range of global threats. Were the United States to cede its global leadership role, it would forgo these proven upsides while exposing itself to the unprecedented downsides of a world in which the country was less secure, prosperous, and influential.

AN AFFORDABLE STRATEGY

Many advocates of retrenchment consider the United States' assertive global posture simply too expensive. The international relations scholar Christopher Layne, for example, has warned of the country's "ballooning budget deficits" and argued that "its strategic commitments exceed the resources available to support them." Calculating the savings of switching grand strategies, however, is not so simple, because it depends on the expenditures the current strategy demands and the amount required for its replacement -- numbers that are hard to pin down.

If the United States revoked all its security guarantees, brought home all its troops, shrank every branch of the military, and slashed its nuclear arsenal, it would save around \$900 billion over ten years, according to Benjamin Friedman and Justin Logan of the Cato Institute. But few advocates of retrenchment endorse such a radical reduction; instead, most call for "restraint," an "offshore balancing" strategy, or an "over the horizon" military posture. The savings these approaches would yield are less clear, since they depend on which security commitments Washington would abandon outright and how much it would cost to keep the remaining ones. If retrenchment simply meant shipping foreign-based U.S. forces back to the United States, then the savings would be modest at best, since the countries hosting U.S. forces usually cover a large portion of the basing costs. And if it meant maintaining a major expeditionary capacity, then any savings would again be small, since the Pentagon would still have to pay for the expensive weaponry and equipment required for projecting power abroad.

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ESSAY, MAR/APR 2012

Clear and Present Safety P

Micah Zenko and **Michael A. Cohen**

U.S. officials and national security experts chronically exaggerate foreign threats, suggesting that the world is scarier and more dangerous than ever. But that is just not true. From the U.S. perspective, at least, the world today is remarkably secure, and Washington needs a foreign policy that reflects that reality. [Read](#)

ESSAY, SEP/OCT 2002

America's Imperial Ambition P

G. John Ikenberry

The concepts emerging from the Bush administration's war on terrorism form a neoimperial vision in which the United States arrogates to itself the global role of setting standards, determining threats, and using force. These radical ideas could transform today's world order in a way that the end of the Cold War did not. The administration's approach is fraught with peril and likely to fail. If history is any guide, it will trigger resistance that will leave America in a more hostile and divided world.

This article appears in the *Foreign Affairs* eBook, "*The U.S. vs. al Qaeda: A History of the War on Terror*." Now available for purchase. [Read](#)

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Lolz · 5 months ago

"Instead, most studies by economists find no clear relationship between military expenditures and economic decline"

You just made Kim Jong Un's day :)

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Terrible example, North Korea has no basis to spend such a vast amount of money on their army. Out of six pages you pick two sentences you disagree with (wrongly even)

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Lolz · 5 months ago

"If Washington got out of East Asia, Japan and South Korea would likely expand their military capabilities and go nuclear, which could provoke a destabilizing reaction from China" Says who?

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Experts, because there is no real deterrence against nuclear weapons besides nuclear weapons.

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Robin Kincaid > Lolz · 4 months ago

Logic, my friend.

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difficult!

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EDWILE MBAMEG · 4 months ago

This article -well written- argues for continuous American engagement in World Politics as opposed to Pulling Back. I have a few remarks.

1. The authors' reasoning suffers from the Fallacy of the Converse. They generalize a specific situation into a sweeping rule. For example, the U.S. has and is militarily and technologically superior hence it will always be that way.

2.The authors point -accurately- that the current International Order was built by the U.S. to undergird its economic, military and geopolitical interests. They fail to factor in the Rise of emerging powers whose interests might be different from that of the U.S. hence are likely going to push for reforming the current system. And most importantly, who are not U.S. allies -China, Brazil, South Africa, Russia and even India.

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