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# Pull Back

## The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy

By **Barry R. Posen**  
January/February 2013

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ESSAY

### Lean Forward

Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth

Now, more than ever, the United States might be tempted to pull back from the world. That would be a mistake, since an engaged grand strategy has served the country exceptionally well for the past six decades -- helping prevent the outbreak of conflict in the world's most important regions, keeping the global economy humming, and facilitating international cooperation.

Despite a decade of costly and indecisive warfare and mounting fiscal pressures, the long-standing consensus among American policymakers about U.S. grand strategy has remained remarkably intact. As the presidential campaign made clear, Republicans and Democrats may quibble over foreign policy at the margins, but they agree on the big picture: that the United States should dominate the world militarily, economically, and politically, as it has since the final years of the Cold War, a strategy of liberal hegemony. The country, they hold, needs to preserve its massive lead in the global balance of power, consolidate its economic preeminence, enlarge the community of market democracies, and maintain its outsized influence in the international institutions it helped create.

To this end, the U.S. government has expanded its sprawling Cold War-era network of security commitments and military bases. It has reinforced its existing alliances, adding new members to NATO and enhancing its security agreement with Japan. In the Persian Gulf, it has sought to protect the flow of oil with a full panoply of air, sea, and land forces, a goal that consumes at least 15 percent of the U.S. defense budget. Washington



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has put China on a watch list, ringing it in with a network of alliances, less formal relationships, and military bases.

The United States' activism has entailed a long list of ambitious foreign policy projects. Washington has tried to rescue failing states, intervening militarily in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya, variously attempting to defend human rights, suppress undesirable nationalist movements, and install democratic regimes. It has also tried to contain so-called rogue states that oppose the United States, such as Iran, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, North Korea, and, to a lesser degree, Syria. After 9/11, the struggle against al Qaeda and its allies dominated the agenda, but the George W. Bush administration defined this enterprise broadly and led the country into the painful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the United States has long sought to discourage the spread of nuclear weapons, the prospect of nuclear-armed terrorists has added urgency to this objective, leading to constant tension with Iran and North Korea.

In pursuit of this ambitious agenda, the United States has consistently spent hundreds of billions of dollars per year on its military -- far more than the sum of the defense budgets of its friends and far more than the sum of those of its potential adversaries. It has kept that military busy: U.S. troops have spent roughly twice as many months in combat after the Cold War as they did during it. Today, roughly 180,000 U.S. soldiers remain stationed on foreign soil, not counting the tens of thousands more who have rotated through the war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thousands of American and allied soldiers have lost their lives, not to mention the countless civilians caught in the crossfire.

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## It is time to abandon the United States' hegemonic strategy and replace it with one of restraint.

raising the costs of carrying out its foreign policy. During the 1990s, these consequences were manageable because the United States enjoyed such a favorable power position and chose its wars carefully. Over the last decade, however, the country's relative power has deteriorated, and policymakers have made dreadful choices concerning which wars to fight and how to fight them. What's more, the Pentagon has come to depend on continuous infusions of cash simply to retain its current force structure -- levels of spending that the Great Recession and the United States' ballooning debt have rendered unsustainable.

It is time to abandon the United States' hegemonic strategy and replace it with one of restraint. This approach would mean giving up on global reform and sticking to protecting narrow national security interests. It would mean transforming the military into a smaller force that goes to war only when it truly must. It would mean removing large numbers of U.S. troops from forward bases, creating incentives for allies to provide for their own security. And because such a shift would allow the United States to spend its resources on only the most pressing international threats, it would help preserve the country's prosperity and security over the long run.

### ACTION AND REACTION

The United States emerged from the Cold War as the single most powerful state in modern times, a position that its diversified and immensely productive economy supports. Although its share of world economic output will inevitably shrink as other countries catch up, the United States will continue for many years to rank as one of the top two or three economies in the world. The United States' per capita GDP stands at \$48,000, more than five times as large as China's, which means that the U.S. economy can produce cutting-edge products for a steady domestic market. North America is blessed with enviable quantities of raw materials, and about 29 percent of U.S. trade flows to and from its immediate neighbors, Canada and Mexico. The fortuitous geostrategic position of the United States compounds these economic advantages. Its neighbors to the north and south possess only miniscule militaries. Vast oceans to the west and east separate it from potential rivals. And its thousands of nuclear weapons deter other countries from ever entertaining an invasion.

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Now, more than ever, the United States might be tempted to pull back from the world. That would be a mistake, since an engaged grand strategy has served the country exceptionally well for the past six decades -- helping prevent the outbreak of conflict in the world's most important regions, keeping the global economy humming, and facilitating international cooperation. [Read](#)

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Bluejay2fly • 5 months ago

Those who support global intervention have a very poor understanding of how these policies influence the US as a whole. Yes, you could say that rebuilding and supporting Germany, Japan, and South Korea in post WW2 was needed but did it completely benefit the US? Ask our steel and auto industry which had to compete against newly built factories who benefitted from the latest modern designs. This competitive disadvantage was further compounded by the loss of capital and labor to the defense industry while simultaneously dealing with rising energy costs associated with competition from an oil hungry military (Uses as much oil in a single year as the entire nation of Sweden) and the non existence of a national energy policy. As our allies make huge profits gutting our industries, enjoy a steady income from huge overseas bases, and reinvest in their own society they enjoy prosperity and protection from a nation whose social and material infrastructure is near collapse. Ironically, national defense implies you have something worth protecting and at this point we are sacrificing so much for our huge military industrial congressional complex that we are modeling the same circumstances that destabilized the Soviet Empire. They were once called a midget with a huge right arm because all they had was a hollow economy shoring up a large military. Ironically, our great patriot class do not see our energy dependency, lack of industry, reliance on foreign debt holders (China) to monetize our day to day operations as the single greatest security threat? The other great irony is how we endure 20K murders and 30k suicides a year, millions people in prisons, 500k homeless, tens of millions of unemployed, and many more millions without access to health care, a police force larger than most countries national army, and yet we continue to pour huge sums of money and focus our political attention to world politics while these real problems harm American citizens every day. It is disgraceful how our elites make huge profits from these circumstance at the expense of the nation they are claiming to courageously be defending.

7  |  Reply Share ›



OLIVER ROBINSON > Bluejay2fly • 5 months ago

I'm glad you acknowledge that US support to Japan etc after WW2 was necessary, because it was. As for the Soviet comparison - it's not a great one. True, the US must engage in fiscal reform. We are in agreement that the holding of US debt by China is a security risk. US deficits cannot keep increasing. However, the US only spends around 4% of its GDP on defence - which is not unsustainable. The USSR consistently spent well into the high teens (15-20% in 80's). I think that Europe should begin to increase defence budgets steadily, once they have completed fiscal consolidation. This will relieve some pressure on the US military.

I'm from the UK and don't know all about your industrial/labour problems. I'm not arguing that US interventions have been universally good for the US, but on balance, they have definitely been good for the world. Finally, when you cite the rise of other nations to the detriment of the US, you fail to account for the fact that US share of world GDP has remained remarkably constant over the last 40 years (20-25% of global GDP). I want a strong USA - as should you.

2   Reply Share ›



[mike in north dakota](#) > OLIVER ROBINSON · 4 months ago

US defense spending is more like 4.5%. Some of our most important NATO allies like Germany and Canada spend around 1.4% respectively. Just face it, the US is getting a horrible deal: Audis are shipped worldwide on sea lanes Americans die to protect while Germans use the saving that results in stability to completely pay for the education of their population, including Audi engineers. How can US business compete with that?

2   Reply Share ›



OLIVER ROBINSON > [mike in north dakota](#) · 4 months ago

I know. I said that i'd like NATO allies to spend more on defence. It's not fair to let the US bear the burden alone. But let's establish something. A strong USA is good for the world. The 'pull back' article just denies reality if the author thinks that international peace among great powers is a given and that free trade can remain free if it's not protected.

3   Reply Share ›



[Andreas Nettmayer](#) > OLIVER ROBINSON · 4 months ago

Isn't it the UN's job rather than the US's to preserve peace among powerful nations? I feel the UN and to a lesser extent the EU feel they must be a counter balance to the US's dominance. This creates an anti-US sentiment that is counter-productive to stability.

At the very least, wouldn't it be in the US's long-term interests to attempt to push allies like Canada, Germany, Australia, Japan into re-engagement? The thinking is doing so would increase US standing at international institutions, whereas allies have now reached similar conclusions about security matters as the US, and save the US taxpayer substantial amounts of money.

Moreover, as Iraq and Afghanistan have shown, technological advantage in battle doesn't always translate to victory. The US for the most part does not understand complex tribal cultures or non-liberal cultures well enough to engage successfully. In that regard, any intervention in tribal societies in Africa or the Middle East should be discouraged.

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Andreas Nettmayer > mike in north dakota · 4 months ago

They can't. And aren't competing with that. Which is why you see a massive trade imbalance for the US, despite the agricultural exports that so much of Asia relies on. But US policy isn't set by the consensus of US citizens. I don't think you can underestimate the extent to which the defense industry has created think tanks and institutions to lobby in pro-defense contractor positions.

0 | 0 Reply Share ›



Bluejay2fly > OLIVER ROBINSON · 5 months ago

We spend 4% of GDP on defense? How much of our 15 Trillion dollar debt is defense related? Also, they also hide a lot of defense related expenses outside the defense budget.

2 | 0 Reply Share ›



Andreas Nettmayer > OLIVER ROBINSON · 4 months ago

Americans, and I suppose all democratic countries, can really only deal with a handful of policy issues at once. The President and Congress can only address a few discrete policy areas in any given term. It's therefore vital that the President prioritize the agenda. When foreign conflicts are at the forefront of the discussion, they take away the ability to deal with other policy issues. The US is facing increasing inequality at home due to de-industrialization and globalization, decaying infrastructure, and violent crime rates that (although decreasing) far exceed those found in Europe. Getting tied up in non-vital, regional conflicts like Libya, Syria, Somalia, and Mali detract from the focus on domestic issues that need to be solved to make the US strong. If you really do want a strong USA, pushing for European, Canadian, Australian, Japanese, and South Korean leadership so that the US can afford to give more attention to domestic needs is vital.

One cannot help but wonder how much US domestic progress was stifled by the conflict in Vietnam. Had LBJ not had to deal with that unwinnable conflict, where would his Great Society proposals have gone? Would the Civil Rights agenda advanced further? Would the ghosts of slavery that still haunt the US been put to rest?

1 | 0 Reply Share ›



spengler1 · 5 months ago

How about disengaging our military from countries like Germany and Japan, who 67 years after the end of WWII are not facing serious threats to their existence? Our military presence in Japan in fact is inhibiting the maturation of Japanese society, politically, morally and culturally.

3 Reply Share ›



SCOTT BAILLARGEON · 5 months ago

I have written a synthesis regarding both "Lean Forward" and "Pull Back" which not only incorporate the dilemma posed by retrenchment as well as deep engagement, but also considers the recent US sale of F-16s to Egypt, and Secretary of Defense Hillary Clinton's role in the Benghazi attack. I have expanded the argument to provide agency to the many unforeseen and problematic issues that arise out of the sixty years of liberal-internationalism and globalization. Please visit and provide your scholarly critiques as I am interested in what others will have to say: (It is a little long to post here in a comment

<https://www.facebook.com/notes...>

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OLIVER ROBINSON · 6 months ago

Leaving aside the strategic justifications for US intervention, there is also a moral element that is overlooked in this essay. Was it strategically necessary for the US to go to war against Spain over Cuba? No, but they did it because of the way Spain was treating Cubans - this was an 'internal' affair. Similarly, US intervention in Libya was a moral one - and that was internal too. Intervening in internal affairs of other states often has a moral justification. US power enables atrocities to be stopped. Furthermore, when the author condemns nation-building strategies as futile, he ignores the fact that some of America's biggest trading partners and allies are examples of successful nation-building programmes (Germany, Japan, S Korea). The US occupation in Iraq could have been better spent investing heavily in Iraqi infrastructure and institutions - Iraq may have become a trading partner for the US.

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Andreas Nettmayer &gt; OLIVER ROBINSON · 4 months ago

The problem with intervening into internal issues of another country based on moral issues is that it is very difficult to establish moral claims. Your enemies won't believe you. Defeating and occupying Germany after WWII is a huge outlier, as after the war most Germans came to understand the horror that was occurring in their name and were more or less willing to accept foreign leadership.

The more common situation is like the Balkans, where even after the war the discussion of who holds moral superiority continues. Engage an informed Bosnian or Serb today: the idea the NATO forces had moral superiority in engaging is not one of the common opinions. Even among the Bosnians, the group allegedly most aided by NATO intervention, distrust of the US is very high. The perspective that the US "meddled the whole thing" for its own "imperialist" gain is surprisingly, disturbingly common. This perspective, whether accurate or not, makes life more dangerous for American civilians

and harms American business interests. If the US's goal is to protect the interests of its own population, it needs to better account for how its actions will be perceived by a genuinely distrustful global population.

2   Reply Share › [see more](#)



OLIVER ROBINSON > Andreas Nettmayer · 4 months ago

I'm pretty sure that stopping madmen like Milosevic and Karadzic from continuing their policies of ethnic cleansing represents a moral claim. Bosnians may be being cynical, grumbling about US 'imperialism', but at least there are some Bosnians alive who can grumble.

How many more Bosnians would have died before the EU stepped in? That is precisely why the US intervened. The EU wasn't doing anything about it. It took Madeleine Albright

I agree that we should be empowering these regions to take responsibility - but often it requires a strong presence. Intervening in other countries is often predicated not only on humanitarian principles, but also on strategic concerns. Interventions may seem a waste of money and blood in 'trivial' locations, but power can spread, and soon they'll be knocking at your door. A good defence often requires offensive tactics.

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Andreas Nettmayer > OLIVER ROBINSON · 4 months ago

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