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Washington Is Wrong: America Faces No Serious Military Threats

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Members of Washington, D.C.'s unofficial but bipartisan War Party thrive on bad news. Vladimir Putin is marching on Ukraine. Xi Jinping is reviving the Maoist state and hopes to displace the US from Asia. Iran plans to develop and may use nuclear weapons.

Smaller crises abound. There is chaos and violence everywhere. Lest the new Dark Ages descend, Washington must increase military outlays, intervene more promiscuously, and fight more and bigger wars with greater violence. Not that even then America will be secure. New challenges will impend, and the cycle will repeat. Again and again.

This is not new. At a 2012 hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee the ever-belligerent Sen. John McCain pressed for war against Syria and cited a lengthy list of supposedly deadly threats to America: al-Qaeda, North Korea, China, Taliban, and Mideast. But that wasn't all. He added:

“We could continue for some time listing the myriad of other threats facing our Nation, and I am confident we will cover most of them in today’s hearing. What should be clear is that by no objective assessment are the threats to our national security decreasing. To the contrary, they are increasing as the prepared testimonies of our witnesses make vividly clear. So the question that Members of Congress and the members of this committee in particular need to think long and hard about is this: Why, in an international environment of growing uncertainty, risk, and threat, would we choose to add to those risks by making large and misguided cuts to our national defense budget”?

When James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence testified, he did not disappoint McCain. Clapper declared: “Earlier this month was the 51st anniversary of my enlistment in the Marine Corps and during my subsequent entire career, I do not recall a more complex and interdependent array of challenges than we face today.” This was not a onetime expostulation but was repeated. At another time he said: “In almost 50 years in intelligence, I don’t remember when we’ve had a more diverse array of threats and crisis situations around the world to deal with and, in the face of that, doing this sequestration thing is quite damaging.”

Also in 2012 Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told House members: “I can’t impress upon you that in my personal military judgment, formed over 38 years, we are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime, right now, and I think sequestration would be completely oblivious to that.” The following year he told the Senate Armed Services Committee: “I will personally attest to the fact that [the world is] more dangerous than it has ever been.” He was born in 1952, but the latter point seemed to cover several thousand years of human existence.

The Pentagon relentlessly lobbied to block any outlay cut after the Soviet Union’s demise. Dempsey told the House Armed Services Committee: “There is no foreseeable peace dividend. The security environment is more dangerous and more uncertain.”

In 2013 Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno told the Senate Armed Services Committee: “Today, the global environment is the most uncertain I’ve seen in my 36 years of service. It is unpredictable and dynamic. We simply don’t know when we will have to deploy soldiers to fight again. But history tells us that we will.”

Odierno saw no meaningful end to the US Army’s responsibilities:

“A typical day for our soldiers includes patrolling alongside our Afghan National Army partners, standing watch on the Demilitarized Zone in Korea, providing security for an embassy in South Sudan, manning missile batteries in Turkey and Guam and assisting recovery efforts from the devastating mudslide in the state of Washington. As we consider the future roles and missions of our Army, it’s imperative we consider the world as it exists, not as one we wish it to be.”

The recent headlines on Russia’s annexation of Crimea or the intractable Syrian civil war, artillery exchanges between North Korea and South Korea, just to name a few, remind us of the complexity and uncertainty inherent in the international security environment. It demands that we make prudent decisions about the future capability and capacity that we need within our Army.”

It wasn’t just military men telling Americans that world insecurity had never been worse, or almost, anyway. And that the Pentagon required ever more funds. For instance, also in 2013, opined Director of National Intelligence James Clapper: “In almost 50 years in intelligence, I don’t remember when we’ve had a more diverse array of threats and crisis situations around the world to deal with and, in the face of that, doing this sequestration thing is quite damaging.”

Republicans were particularly overwrought in the face of the incoming Obama administration. Rep. Michael Turner, then a subcommittee chairman on the House Armed Services Committee, observed: “The security environment is more dangerous and more uncertain than ever before. Simply, the world is not becoming a safer place.” Than ever before? Like Dempsey, Turner appeared to be saying this was the worst moment in human history.

His sentiments evidently have not changed. A decade later he is trying to push America into war with Russia over Ukraine. Turner and 14 colleagues wrote President Joe Biden urging him to provide intelligence and weapons to Kyiv. In another letter, with Rep. Mike Rodgers (R-Al.),

Turner proposed that the administration “deploy a U.S. military presence in the Black Sea to deter a Russian invasion.” That certainly would result in uncertainty and danger!

Sen. Jim Inhofe was similarly unsettled. He declared in 2013 that he did not remember “a time in my life where the world has been more dangerous and the threats more diverse.” It is unclear how far back his memory goes, but he was born in 1934. Presumably he recalls Nazi Germany and World War II, if not all their details. And then came the Cold War.

The same year the ever-hysterical Sen. Lindsey Graham was concerned that former GOP Sen. Chuck Hagel, nominated to be secretary of defense, did not also believe the New Dark Ages had arrived: “I’ve never seen the world more dangerous than it is now.” Graham was born in 1955.

If anything, Graham’s view of the world has grown only more madcap as he demonstrated an almost childlike enthusiasm for getting the US to intervene in almost every war. It didn’t matter who was shooting at whom: he wanted America, meaning Americans, to join in. Why undertake such dangerous campaign? Apparently because the world is dangerous!

One of his more bizarre missions, alongside fellow militarists McCain and former Sen. Joe Lieberman—the Senate’s infamous Three Wannabe Horsemen of the Apocalypse—was a 2009 visit to Tripoli in support of then Libyan strongman Muammar Khadafy. Less than two years later, amid the Arab Spring in 2011 (before Graham was marveling at how dangerous the world had become), they were campaigning in Washington for Khadafy’s ouster, doing the political equivalent of the Maori Haka up and down the Capitol steps while demanding military action.

Even worse was Graham’s more recent endorsement of nuclear war against North Korea. Long the loyal sidekick to war-happy McCain, Graham gravitated toward Donald Trump, to whom the senator offered ostentatious subservience. That appears to include advocating nuclear war. In speaking about South Korea in 2017 Graham explained: “If there’s going to be a war to stop [Kim Jong-un], it will be over there. If thousands die, they’re going to die over there. They’re not going to die here.” Graham added: “And that may be provocative, but not really. When you’re president of the United States, where does your allegiance lie? To the people of the United States.” Of course, Graham’s “splendid little war” probably would kill at least tens of thousands of Americans even if kept “over there” as well as potentially millions of other people.

Six years ago most of the Republican Party candidates for president were competing to paint the bleakest picture and promise the most extreme responses. The chief Cassandra—without the original figure’s accuracy—was Chris Christie, who proclaimed the world to be at its most dangerous point during his lifetime (he was born in 1962). On a visit to New Hampshire he declared: “It is time for us to open our eyes and not to think about the world as we wish it was but to deal with the world as we see it is. And it is a dark and dangerous place right now. In every corner that we look.”

Naturally, in his view, the problem was that the US was not bombing, invading, and occupying enough countries. He observed: “When America retreats from its role of leadership in the world, a vacuum is created and that vacuum is filled by bad people with bad intentions.” He pointed to “Putin, the Mullahs in Iran, the communists in China, the crazy man in North Korea. And the

terrorist organizations like ISIS that are now reconstituting and rebuilding Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.”

Christie’s most fevered moment came when he threatened war against Russia. He insisted that he would apply a “no-fly” zone against Russia, an issue which most of the candidates avoided. But not Christie. When asked if he would shoot down Russian aircraft, Christie responded: “Not only would I be prepared to do it, I would do it. A no-fly zone means a no-fly zone.” Never mind that Moscow is a nuclear-armed power concerned about its interests and credibility.

The moment was high spectacle. It obviously failed to win Christie many votes, but it illustrated the serious derangement of much of America’s governing class. If he thought the world was a dangerous mess before going to war with Moscow, imagine how it would look during and after doing so! Ironically, despite Donald Trump’s manifold flaws, the latter was notably more pacific in policy if not rhetoric. Indeed, Trump was the first president since Reagan not to start a new war.

Who has taken over from Christie, now (mercifully!) largely vanished from the national political stage, as the best example of a maniacal wannabe Feldmarschall? There is Graham, of course. Moreover, Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) shares Christie’s and Graham’s thoughtless militarism, having proposed “military action” against Russia over Ukraine, which, he explained, could mean raining “destruction on Russian military capability” and even engaging in “first use nuclear action.” Wicker has so far has not repeated Christie’s lurid descriptions of the current threat environment, but these policy prescriptions are even more unbalanced than Christie’s.

We are living in “interesting times,” fulfilling the fabled (if likely apocryphal) Chinese curse. However, interesting does not mean dangerous, at least to America. Observed the University of Chicago’s John Mearsheimer: “Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the United States is a remarkably secure country. No great power in world history comes to enjoying the security it does today.” America enjoys large oceans east and west, pacific and weak neighbors north and south. It doesn’t get much better than that, which is why the US is able to wander the globe playing unipower and essential nation.

Given that security, not much overseas matters a lot. Washington has interests everywhere, but few are important, let alone vital. The great tragedies of today—Afghanistan, Burma, Syria, and so many more—have little practical impact on the US. Supposedly “threatening” nations which cause constant near delirium in Washington, such as Iran and North Korea, wouldn’t pay the slightest attention to America if US military forces were not over there threatening them.

Indeed, America faces no serious military threats. None in the Western hemisphere or Africa. Certainly not in Europe. Not even Russia, which is a declining power that could be contained by the Europeans, if they didn’t work so hard to push their defense burden on Washington. Nor are the US and Moscow in conflict over any essential territory or interest.

The security threat posed by the People’s Republic of China is also much overblown. Who imagines a vast Chinese armada heading across the Pacific to conquer North America? US officials are warning of doom because Beijing apparently is expanding a nuclear force which will

remain well behind that of America. China has no allies and few friends. It shares land borders with 14 nations; over the last century it has been at war with neighboring Russia, Vietnam, Japan, India, and Korea. Beijing still poses a potent challenge to the US, but primarily economic. What Chinese official would not prefer to hold America's geopolitical cards?

As for the overall geopolitical environment, how can anyone take seriously claims that the world today is more dangerous than during the Cold War, highlighted by Soviet interventions in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan? There also were the Cuban Missile Crisis and more modest but still dangerous Moscow freakout over Able Archer 83. Is today really worse than when Nazis and fascists dominated Europe and Imperial Japan was constructing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere? And during the Vietnam and Korean Wars? How about during times of endless regional catastrophes: the Balkans, multiple Indo-Pakistani wars, the horrific war that enveloped the Democratic Republic of Congo, terrible civil wars in Nigeria, Liberia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Algeria, and elsewhere, multiple Mideast and North African conflicts, Cambodian genocide, Indonesian conflicts within and without, and national implosions such as Somalia? Is the Russia-Ukraine contretemps worse than World War II, the bloodiest, most destructive conflict in human history, or at least in human memory? Today is worse than all these. Seriously!?

That doesn't mean the world is not dangerous. But the degree of peril reflects America's actions. The parties who proclaim themselves to be most agitated by the state of the world are the same ones seeking to make it far more dangerous by having America take on everyone else's problem. War with Russia over Ukraine? Nuclear war against North Korea? War with China over Taiwan? War against Iran? Military intervention in Syria? Intervention in Central Asia and the Caucasus? Micromanaging the Balkans? Why are these America's worries?

The American people should break the cycle. Washington's chief business should be their defense, not that of the rest of the world. What goes on elsewhere matters to the US, but rarely warrants the kind of frenzied and all-too-often violent intervention that characterizes Washington's foreign policy today. Ultimately, Americans would be much safer if America did less around the world. Much less.

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