



## Instead of Sharing Burdens, It's Time for America To Start Shedding Burdens

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It is tough today to be a member of the Washington foreign policy establishment, called "the Blob" by onetime deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes. Members of the Blob make, implement, and assess foreign policy. Their general shared objective is to run the world. Alas, nothing they do seems to be working very well.

Although they fight fiercely over influence, positions, and rewards, they even more resolutely work together to resist accountability. The Blob took America over a humanitarian cliff in the Iraq war, yet who among those responsible for years of brutal sectarian conflict, hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, millions of people displaced, and the destruction of historic religious minorities in Iraq alone paid a professional price for their grotesque policy malpractice?

To the contrary, they uniformly advanced professionally and continue to despoil the foreign policy debate, authoritatively pushing more interventions, commitments, and wars. The cost never seems to matter because others always pay.

Instead, Washington should be retrenching. America is under domestic siege, with widening political divides and uncontrolled government spending. Today policymakers are juggling at least four possible wars: Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. An outside observer could be forgiven for believing that Blob members have never heard of the concept of setting priorities. *Everything* is vital and we are a global power! The entire world must be brought under Washington's, meaning the Blob's, control. Onward, irrespective of cost and risk!

Alas, desperately attempting to do everything as resources drop and challenges rise is a prescription for failure and even disaster. In contrast, history demonstrates that great powers in decline often retrenched with great success. They set priorities and often retained their relative influence.

What would retrenchment look like for the US? First, Washington should set regional priorities. The Western Hemisphere will always matter most for America. That's why Blob members routinely deploy the Monroe Doctrine even as they piously decry the concept of spheres of influence and endorse self-determination by other nations. They fervently believe in those ideas, except when they don't, which is whenever America hopes to dominate whatever country is

being discussed. But then, all nations behave in a blatantly hypocritical and self-interested manner. That isn't going to change.

The Middle East is much less important than it once was in a more diverse global marketplace. If the US worried about global energy supplies, it would stop sanctioning oil powers such as Venezuela and Iran – especially for so little policy benefit. America is the globe's greatest energy producer and is no longer so dependent on energy imports. The Europeans still rely on Mideast oil, but their governments can build competent militaries to protect access to such resources if desired. There no longer is a global threat like the Soviet Union which, it was feared, might sever Western access to the region's oil and natural gas. Israel is a regional superpower able to defend itself and work with the Gulf states to constrain Iran or any other local threats. The Islamic State, al-Qaeda affiliates, and other malign groups still exist, but face a Mideast united about little other than against them.

Europe still matters to America, but no longer needs US military support. Depending on the measure used, the continent enjoys between a five-to-one and eleven-to-one economic advantage over Russia, the only plausible military threat. Europe's population is more than three times as great.

Moreover, despite the ongoing contretemps over Ukraine, Moscow has shown no interest in war with Europe, which would bring Russia few benefits but massive costs. Kyiv would not even be an issue had not the US and Europe, filled with hubris after the Cold War's end, not marched NATO steadily eastward toward Russia. As long as Washington is willing to keep European countries as defense dependents, they won't do more for themselves. Facing expulsion from America's military dole, however, the Europeans could not longer cheap ride on the US.

Washington has been increasingly drawn into internal conflicts in Africa. The continent is primarily an economic and humanitarian concern for the US, not a security priority. In confronting security threats countries should first look to regional cooperation, through the Africa Union, for instance. Many nations also retain close ties with former colonial powers France and Great Britain, which often have played an important military role in their former colonies. Getting entangled in local conflicts puts a target on Americans.

Asia matters most to the US, other than the Western Hemisphere. But not all parts of the continent. Asia is the world's most economically vibrant region, containing China, a likely eventual peer competitor to America, and several treaty allies. But Central Asia, from which the US just escaped, is isolated and surrounded great and near great powers. Afghanistan's role in international terrorism was happenstance, not inherent to the region. East and South Asia matter more to Washington, though the issues even there are primarily economic, not security. Frenetic demands that the US do more militarily ignore the fact that it sits more than 7000 miles away.

Second Washington should connect degrees of interest and forms of involvement overseas. As a superpower with global reach, America has interests everywhere. Few are existential, however. Most are of modest through minimal importance, if that.

Moreover, the US should calibrate its reaction to the form and degree of interest involved. Washington has an enormous bully pulpit, possesses a global diplomatic presence, leads scores of allies/partners/friends, can use economic rewards and punishments, and possesses the world's most expensive and expansive military.

Unfortunately, as oft has been said, Uncle Sam is like the person with a hammer – every problem looks like a nail. Hence the promiscuous use of force and participation in endless wars for no good purpose. One wonders if some ivory tower warriors get vicarious pleasure pushing Uncle Sam to wage wars they were unwilling to fight in their youth.

Policymakers, especially legislators, also appear to suffer from an almost irresistible impulse to "do something," even if there is nothing useful or effective to be done. This tends to be most exhibited by imposing seemingly endless sanctions on adversaries and even allies which resist US demands. (How *dare* Germany decide it wants a direct natural gas pipeline from Russia. Who are *these people*? Washington knows better!) Although Americans treat sanctions as something akin to diplomacy, they actually can be more deadly and destructive than military action.

So what to do when international issues beckon? In most such cases the US government should rely on less coercive foreign policy tools. In many instances it would be best for Washington to do little or nothing. There really is no need to leave every thought about how every other nation should order its affairs go unsaid. Americans don't like foreigners criticizing the US. Americans shouldn't be surprised that foreigners react similarly to criticism from Washington policymakers.

When to move to coercion? Political clashes, absent a demand for abject submission, or economic interests, other than perhaps a threat of general economic collapse, rarely warrant use of force. So, too, humanitarian concerns. The military may sometimes be a weapon of necessity, but rarely of good. It is not well-suited for transforming and uplifting societies. The human costs to the supposed beneficiaries of America's recent wars have been extraordinary. Similarly deadly have been maximum economic sanctions, especially secondary and financial, in which Washington usually ends up starving already suffering people without forcing the desired political change – as in Syria, Venezuela, Iran, and North Korea.

What kind of interests are truly vital? Protecting the American people – their territory, independence, liberties, and prosperity. How might these interests be threatened? Not easily. The US enjoys vast oceans east and west, pacific neighbors north and south. America is probably the most secure great power in history. The United Kingdom benefited from its island status, but the English Channel was not as close to an impermeable barrier to invasion.

For what might the US need to use force? Deterring or otherwise preventing a general nuclear exchange involving America, resulting in mass death and destruction. Also threatening, though likely beyond Washington's reach, would be the potential use of nuclear weapons by other powers elsewhere, with catastrophic climatic impacts. Today, at least, such events seem highly unlikely. Other important, even if not society ending, nuclear threats: limited strikes, terrorist attacks, and accidental launches. The first is most likely in response to an American effort at forcible disarmament, of North Korea, in particular. The second is a greater risk the more

enemies Washington makes. The third is multiplied when lesser powers believe nukes are necessary for protection, particularly from a power, such as the US, which defenestrates other regimes with some regularity.

Also warranting the use of force, deterring a general conventional war (or speedily ending one that arises). Despite the dispute over Ukraine, the US and Russia have no vital interests in conflict, which diminishes the threat of conflict. In Asia the clash with China is potentially serious but is not over US security directly. Rather, Washington is threatening to fight to preserve American influence in the region, frankly, to keep East Asia as a US rather than Chinese sphere of influence, which hardly seems worth a war.

At the extreme preventing a hostile power from dominating Eurasia might warrant military action, but in a world of nuclear weapons the possibility appears to be less than remote. Certainly, neither Russia nor Europe will overrun the other and attack China. Nor does the PRC have the means to effectively dominate its Asian neighbors – it shares land borders with 14 nations – let alone Russia and Europe.

In this world it is difficult to justify military garrisons in Europe and combat deployments in Africa and the Middle East. Personnel training and weapons transfers, used sparingly, might be justified, but not when used to underwrite brutal aggression for national aggrandizement, as in Yemen. There the US is guilty of war crimes and risks spawning a new generation of terrorists seeking revenge.

In Asia the US can best act as a distant back up to states expected to look after their own interests. Just as it is expensive for America to project power to China, it is expensive for China to project power to Japan and Australia. It makes little sense for the US to bear a defense burden three or four times as great as Tokyo in order to help the latter against China and North Korea. The country which should be paying is the one at risk. Similarly, South Korea has 50 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea: why does Seoul expect Americans to forever garrison the peninsula?

It's time to revamp US foreign policy and begin a military retrenchment. The answers won't always be clear and obvious. After all, foreign policy is uniquely practical and circumstantial. Given geography alone, France, China, Australia, and America would adopt radically different foreign policies. The US is unusually safe and should act accordingly.

There would still be much for policymakers to dispute. What units move back from where and how fast? Who warrants some assistance and how much? When should the US act as a backstop to an ally's survival and when should Americans decide no involvement is warranted?

It is time to have these debates and begin reducing US ambitions, instead focusing on the interests of the American people while adapting policies to available resources. The sooner we do so, the stronger America will remain. And the better able it will be to respond to the unexpected vicissitudes of today's world.

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