



Time for a Foreign Policy of Adequacy, not Primacy

Doug Bandow

May 5, 2021

Perhaps the biggest problem with U.S. foreign policy is the belief that Americans are born to rule the world. American exceptionalism means being convinced that citizens of this nation have the mandate of heaven to kill whoever and destroy whatever is necessary to impose their will on every nation and person on the planet. For the good of humanity, obviously!

If that seems harsh, consider Washington's record. Over the last half century no country has gone to war as often. Sanctioned as many nations. Destroyed as many countries. Ravaged as many societies. Created, fomented, or fueled as many civil wars. At least since the end of the Cold War the US also may have caused more deaths than any other state. And displaced more people. In sum, in recent years no other government has done as much harm while its officials pompously swaggered about the world issuing imperious dictates, praising themselves sanctimoniously, and blaming others for the resulting death, destruction, and chaos.

Hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions killed. Reflect upon the graveyards filled with America's victims. Millions displaced. Consider the communities destroyed and emptied after the US intervened. Unimaginable hardship imposed on tens of millions of people. Gaze upon the consequences of militarized social engineering by self-satisfied, well-compensated, and extraordinarily comfortable US policymakers, oblivious to the world around them.

All because American officials believe that they are entitled to treat other people as pawns in a global chess game and decide "the price is worth it," as UN Ambassador and later Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared when callously dismissing the deaths of a half million Iraqi babies. After all, she emphasized, America's elite stand so much higher and see so much further, entitling them to do whatever is necessary to get their way.

The US continues to starve entire peoples. To illegally fight forever wars. And to insist that the entire world do as told by its betters in Washington. Resistance, even by friendly democracies, is crushed if necessary.

Perhaps the most striking American characteristic is carelessness rather than maliciousness. By and large, even most war-happy Neoconservatives, including the slightly deranged triumphalists who plotted invasions of Syria, Iran, and much of the known world after Iraq, were not intending to kill, maim, and destroy on such a massive scale. However, reckless indifference and arrogant stupidity do not excuse their horrific conduct. Nothing done by the Soviet Union/Russia since crushing the Hungarian Revolution and the People's Republic of China since launching the Great

Proletarian Cultural Revolution has been as harmful, in terms of lives lost, injured, and disrupted, as the Iraq invasion. Nothing.

Yet no US officials have been held accountable for their policy malpractice on a massive scale.

With the denizens of Washington simultaneously determined to run the world and incapable of doing so competently, it is essential to reorient US foreign policy away from primacy to adequacy. When Lord Acton offered his famous aphorism that "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely," he did not limit its application to the forces of evil. He was a loyal Catholic speaking about the papacy. Americans, too, are susceptible to hubris.

Indeed, arrogance may be even more dangerous when infecting the well-intentioned and decently minded. Especially when so many people, like the typical US foreign policy practitioner, are at best ignorant incompetents, moralistic simpletons, and overly credentialed fools. Think Madeleine Albright, among many others, who repeatedly fulfilled the infamous Peter Principle while so confidently consigning Iraqi babies to death.

This kind of malign thinking will change only if American foreign and military policy change. The US needs to moderate its ambitions and reduce its force structure accordingly.

Today policymakers seek primacy, that is, the military means to dominate the world. Washington's objective is to shape everything everywhere in America's image or at least to America's advantage. The juggernaut of US power is set to roll over friend and foe alike. Indeed, friends who resist Washington's dictates tend to be treated like foes.

The old saying applies: if all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Moreover, the possession of great military power encourages the US to inflate its ambitions and turn them into dictates. Many American officials end up sounding a lot like Albright when addressing other nations: we know more than you, we get to make the decisions, the costs to you are irrelevant, shut up and do what we tell you. But don't worry, be happy – the resulting death and destruction are for your own good!

America's security problems should be relatively straightforward. Prevent a hostile invasion. Neither Canada nor Mexico is likely to raise and employ a conquering army. Protect the coasts from amphibious assault. Even a larger Chinese navy isn't likely to seize Hawaii, let alone California (though these days that might be the only way to save the Golden State from ruinous socialist rule!). Deter missile or aerial attack. Russia and America alike possess forces able to deter, not conquer, and even the most belligerent Neocon doesn't expect Moscow to attempt to incinerate America, consigning itself to a radioactive funeral pyre in return.

There's terrorism, but it isn't an existential threat and since 9/11 even the most hostile groups have struck out attempting to hit the homeland. Ending promiscuous warmongering in the pursuit of primacy also would help stop creating enemies faster than US forces are killing them. Beyond that Washington should eschew nation-building, stop subsidizing rich friends, leave corrupt royal regimes to hire their own bodyguards, and avoid taking sides in other nations' territorial disputes.

The US still could offer support if a vital ally faced an existential threat from a hegemonic enemy, which currently doesn't exist. About the only plausible case today might be aiding Japan against China, but Beijing isn't interested in conquering the archipelago and Tokyo devotes far

less effort to defend than America. Japan should take care of itself before looking to Washington for aid.

Having thus rejected military intervention as a first resort, US policymakers could assess the foreign problems and decide whether they require action. If so, then what? Almost everything happening abroad affects some interest, given America's globe-spanning role. However, few matter much, reflecting one of many advantages of being a superpower. Most of the problems that trigger frenzied concern and demands for action in Washington – civil war in Syria, revolt in Libya, annexation of Crimea, squabble over the Senkaku Islands, Chinese ships squatting in waters contested by the Philippines – could be safely ignored or accommodated at minimal cost.

Refocusing on America's defense, rather than attempting to impose Washington's will upon the world, would allow a significant downsizing of the US military. Especially ground forces, since the Pentagon no longer would be expected to fight a massive land war in Europe or Asia or engage in multiple nation-building crusades everywhere.

Indeed, pressure for serious reductions will soon become unremitting. Washington's debts run 100 percent of GDP and will soon break the record set after World War II. By 2050, the Congressional Budget Office warns, the national debt could be at 200 percent of GDP. Moreover, President Joe Biden seems intent on doubling or trebling debt levels with wildly excessive proposals to shower the country with money for just about every purpose known to man, and probably a few unknown ones. As a result, interest rates are not likely to remain ever so kind to Uncle Sam. Some priorities will have to be set. A good place to start would be to stop wasting resources on foreign conflicts which make America less safe.

In short, the US requires an adequate foreign policy and military force. Something able to protect the nation, not run the world. A commitment and ability to deter attack, not to assault everyone else. A return to the approach one would expect from a democratic republic, especially one that is essentially bankrupt, currently running up charges that its creditors might soon doubt will ever be repaid.

Providing for the "common defense" is a constitutional obligation. However, the founders believed defense meant, well, defense, not imperious rule over the entire globe. Joe Biden should act against type and focus on his domestic responsibilities. Not just as a matter of urgent necessity. But as a matter of constitutional responsibility as well.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.