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Washington's Foreign-Policy Hypochondria

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The recent brouhaha in the foreign-policy community and the media about the alleged threat of an^[3] isolationist^[4] resurgence^[5] would be humorous if it were not symptomatic of a larger, more serious problem with the U.S. political system. The John McCains and Max Boots of the world throw their latest temper tantrums merely because more sensible analysts recognize the increasingly obvious point that the United States is overextended strategically and financially. It is imperative that American leaders become serious about setting both domestic- and foreign-policy priorities before that problem becomes a crisis. But the hysterical (in both senses of that term) charges of isolationism in response to modest proposals to prune Washington's overgrown international-security commitments raise the troubling prospect that this country's political elite is incapable of making that adjustment.

Even a cursory examination of U.S actions in the international arena since the fall of the Berlin

Wall provides strong evidence of a country that cannot, or at least will not, make even basic distinctions [6] among vital interests, secondary interests, peripheral interests and irrelevant matters. In the little more than two decades since that watershed event, U.S. military forces have gone into action in an extraordinary number of places for a bewildering range of reasons. The proverbial man from Mars who examined the list of military interventions would be hard-pressed to discern a rational, much less a coherent, grand strategy.

What is one to make of military missions in places as diverse as Panama, Kuwait, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and now Libya? Some locales might arguably have strategic relevance to the United States, but others clearly do not. The mishmash of justifications given for undertaking those missions also suggests policy incoherence. And the trend is especially worrisome. In the two decades since the end of the Cold War, the United States has initiated nearly twice as many military interventions as during the more than four decades of the Cold War. Washington's use of military force has become disturbingly promiscuous.

That would be bad enough even if the United States were financially sound and its armed forces were not overextended. But neither situation is true today. The U.S. military has had to extend the term of service for various personnel beyond the normal obligation and has had to dilute the requirements (including character standards) for new recruits. The onset of the current severe recession has reduced those personnel problems, but that is just a temporary phenomenon. We clearly are asking our troops to do too many tasks in too many places.

The federal government's bleeding of red ink at the rate of \$1.5 trillion a year reinforces the urgency to set policy priorities and prune nonessential programs and commitments. That, of course, is not just a foreign-policy problem; the domestic mismatch of goals and means is perhaps even more striking, as the unfunded liabilities of such entitlement programs as Social Security and Medicare threaten to swamp what remains of America's fiscal health. But the foreign-policy component is not trivial. A country that spends some \$700 billion a year on the military—nearly as much as the rest of the world combined—has room (and need) to reduce those outlays as well.

To do so, however, requires abandoning the mindset that any significant change in the foreign-policy status quo would signal isolationism and lead in short order to global chaos. Unless one assumes that there are no other capable powers in the world whose interests overlap with those of the United States—or, alternatively, that those nations would be catatonic and not seek to maintain stability in their own regions despite an obvious security interest in doing so—the thesis of global chaos absent perpetual U.S. hegemony is utter nonsense. America's allies and clients free ride on Washington's security exertions [7] because it is convenient for them to do so, not because they have no alternative. The member states of the European Union, for example, are certainly capable of handling any likely security problems that might emerge in their neighborhood. It is preposterous to assert that the EU, an entity that has both a larger population and a larger economy than the United States, cannot deal with new troubles in the Balkans—the most likely arena for instability.

Adopting a more prudent, more sustainable U.S. grand strategy requires a number of changes. Perhaps most important, Washington must overcome what amounts to foreign-policy hypochondria. The United States worries about international developments that normal, rational great powers would ignore. What goes on in Haiti, Burma, Belarus or Libya need not and should not be a matter of significant concern to the United States. Instead, Washington has become the Aunt Myrtle of the international community—a busybody who insists on meddling in everyone else's affairs, often for trivial reasons, citing far-fetched security justifications for doing so.

U.S. leaders must establish a sensible threshold for determining whether an adverse development warrants U.S. attention—much less U.S. military action. Except for direct threats (e.g., terrorist plots or the emergence of a hostile peer competitor), such a development needs to have the clear potential to disrupt the stability of the international system and be large enough that it is beyond the capability of other major powers to handle it in a way that is compatible with American interests. John Hillen, once a policy scholar for the Heritage Foundation, put it well when he quipped that “superpowers don’t do windows.” Unfortunately, since he wrote those words in the mid-1990s, the United States has become the global window washer.

America still has considerable strengths, including a huge, productive economy, a conventional military force that is by far the best in the world, a large, lethal nuclear deterrent and strong cultural appeal around the globe. Along with envious geographic advantages (no regional peer competitors and oceanic buffers on both flanks), those factors should make the United States the most secure great power in history.

Instead, we are rapidly dissipating many of our strengths. There needs to be a real debate about reconciling means and ends in both domestic and foreign policy to restore what Walter Lippmann described as policy solvency. Wild accusations about imminent isolationism contribute nothing to that badly needed discussion.

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