



# A Trenchant Yet Flawed Analysis of American Foreign Policy

by [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)

Angelo Codevilla's [analysis](#) of the many problems associated with U.S. foreign policy provides an abundance of important insights. He is devastatingly on the mark when he contends that since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. officials have transformed the Founders' emphasis on shielding the American people against external dangers into an arrogant, unattainable objective of leading (and improving) all mankind. That is the essence of the approach first embraced by Woodrow Wilson and subsequently practiced by several generations of disciples.

Codevilla's litany of the negative consequences from such hubris, while depressing, is supported by ample evidence. The situation has become especially unpleasant in recent decades and continues to get worse. Since the end of World War II, the United States has been entangled in some nine significant armed conflicts: Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon, the Persian Gulf War, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. That total does not even include numerous "minor" interventions, such as those in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Libya.

Moreover, the pace of Washington's global meddling is accelerating, especially under the umbrella of the so-called war on terror following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Codevilla is correct that the U.S. government's attempts to cope with terrorism have further endangered the republic while changing it for the worse. Wasting nearly two trillion dollars (and counting) in the futile nation-building crusades in Iraq and Afghanistan has intensified America's fiscal and economic woes, but even worse are the changes to the country's social and political character. The NSA's appalling conduct, especially the spying on ordinary Americans; the militarization of America's local police forces; and the further empowerment of an already dangerous imperial presidency are just a few of the worrisome consequences flowing from a promiscuous, global interventionist foreign policy.

Whether Codevilla is correct that destructive U.S. actions overseas have occurred despite good intentions on the part of policymakers is debatable. Some officials appear to have been true believers in the Wilsonian dream, but much of Washington's conduct has reflected less savory motives. The willingness of U.S. leaders to back an assortment of sleazy rulers, such as Anastasio Somoza, the Shah of Iran, Nguyen Van Thieu, Park Chung-hee, Ferdinand Marcos, and the Saudi royal family, had more to do with cynical, albeit myopic, calculations of realpolitik than any commitment to idealism. Likewise, American policymakers certainly knew that the

Afghan *mujahideen* (a term that translated as “holy warriors,” not “freedom fighters”) or the Kosovo Liberation Army did not embrace the values of freedom and democracy. Yet they actively supported such movements and, even worse, portrayed them in glowing terms to the American people.

While Codevilla’s indictment of Washington’s foreign policy is generally accurate, the quality of his prescriptions for change are decidedly mixed. His basic observation that it is imperative to distinguish America’s business from that of other nations is absolutely correct, and it is a distinction too many policymakers fail to make. The current roster of U.S. geostrategic initiatives confirms the extent of the problem. Washington is attempting to heavily influence (and, in many cases, dictate) outcomes in places ranging from the South China Sea and the East China Sea, to Libya, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Ukraine.

Not only is achieving such a laundry list of objectives beyond the capability of any country, even a superpower, but it suggests a frightening inability or unwillingness to set priorities. It is questionable whether any of those hot spots are truly essential to the security and liberty of the American people, but at a minimum, it should be apparent to any realistic official that some are less relevant than others. Yet the current crop of foreign policy practitioners regards all of them as crucial to the republic and warranting intense U.S. efforts.

The result is imperial overstretch that generates an assortment of unpleasant consequences. Washington is becoming re-involved in Iraq’s internecine conflicts and flirts with doing so in Syria’s even more convoluted struggles. As University of Chicago Professor John Mearsheimer points out in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the U.S. decision to expand NATO to Russia’s borders, thereby refusing to concede even a limited sphere of influence to Moscow in Eastern Europe, has brought us perilously close to re-igniting the Cold War. The ongoing crisis in Ukraine is the inevitable consequence of crowding Russia in that fashion.

Even worse, by meddling in the territorial disputes between China and its neighbors regarding the South China Sea, and in the even more acrimonious feud between Beijing and Tokyo over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, Washington is pursuing a confrontational policy toward China at the same time that U.S. relations with Russia are deteriorating. That approach risks driving those two major powers together into a *de facto* alliance directed against the United States. Yet even Henry Kissinger, hardly an advocate of a noninterventionist U.S. foreign policy, wisely warned decades ago that Washington should always aim to have better relations with both Moscow and Beijing than they have with each other.

Codevilla’s analysis is the most trenchant at the level of grand strategy. In refreshing contrast to many policymakers and scholars, he stresses the need to set priorities. Moreover, he explicitly acknowledges that, except when truly vital American interests are at stake, policy decisions must be made on the basis of sober cost-benefit calculations. Such basic prudence would have prevented Washington from wasting thousands of American lives and hundreds of billions of tax dollars in such misguided ventures as the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Although Codevilla is usually incisive regarding the main features of grand strategy, his analysis is sometimes less so with respect to important details. For example, his assertion that “minding

America's business is no demotion from the rank of global leader" reflects wishful thinking. A more restrained U.S. foreign policy focused on defending America's liberty and security would require relinquishing the conceit of global leadership. It would mean accepting the reality that although the United States might be "first among equals," it would no longer exercise the outsized degree of power and influence that it has since the end of World War II. The international system is moving toward multipolarity regardless of Washington's wishes in any case, but it is important to recognize that the change means at least a modest decline in status and leverage for the United States. It also might mean a greater degree of instability in some regions—with the offsetting benefit that America would no longer be on the front lines of every parochial conflict.

On some occasions, Codevilla makes a muddle of the role that incentives play in international affairs. For instance, he asserts flatly that a militarily powerful Europe is out of the question. No one can possibly make that claim with certainty. Democratic Europe has had the luxury of free-riding on the security exertions of the United States for decades. The European powers are not serious about devoting adequate financial resources to their own defenses, because they have not had to do so. If the United States removed the NATO security blanket, however, the incentive structure would change dramatically. Perhaps the Europeans would seek to appease an increasingly assertive Russia, but conversely, the European Union might finally grow up and apply its considerable wealth to developing an independent geopolitical center of power to protect the interests of its member states. One cannot blithely assume that they would choose the appeasement option.

Codevilla also conflates a number of distinct developments in East Asia to reach dubious conclusions. He is especially concerned that "China's bid for hegemony is stimulating Japan (and possibly South Korea) to consider becoming a nuclear power." Such a development, along with East Asia's cultural and racial animosities, he argues, "will likely pose the biggest challenge to America's geopolitical interests." One wonders whether Codevilla is worried more about a Chinese bid for regional hegemony or a vigorous response by Beijing's neighbors. If he is concerned primarily about the former, he should welcome signs of rearmament and strong military resistance to Beijing's moves on the part of Japan and other East Asian powers acting independently of the United States. That course would reduce the risk of a direct confrontation between the United States and China, while providing indirect protection to some American interests in the region. Instead, Codevilla advocates trying to revitalize Washington's fraying, Cold War-era system of alliances with East Asian countries, which would merely perpetuate an unhealthy tendency of those nations to rely excessively on U.S. security commitments.

He does at least appreciate the underlying tension and dilemma in America's relations with China. It was relatively easy for Washington to design and implement a containment policy toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The United States had minimal economic ties with the USSR, and America's key allies likewise did not have major commercial links—at least until the last decade or so of the Cold War. The situation with respect to China is fundamentally different. The East Asian nations all have important economic relations with Beijing, as does America. There are clearly difficulties in trying to design a containment strategy against a country that is America's third largest trading partner and holds some \$1.3 trillion in U.S. Treasury debt. Too many members of America's foreign policy community act as though there is

no inherent tension between a *de facto* containment policy and maintaining a robust, bilateral economic relationship—an attitude epitomized by the popular, but vacuous, term “conengagement.” Codevilla deserves credit for highlighting the dilemma.

Unfortunately, his analysis of U.S. foreign policy is much weaker when he delves into cultural factors. Codevilla’s hostility to immigration from other than traditional European sources lurks not far beneath the surface. His attempt to defend the goals of the Immigration Act of 1924 is especially unfortunate. That measure was a blatant expression of ethnic bigotry, and it was no coincidence that it became law during the same decade that witnessed the surge of support for the Klu Klux Klan and its ugly anti-foreign, anti-Catholic, and white supremacist agenda. Codevilla should recognize that support for the values of individual liberty, limited government, and the avoidance of unnecessary wars transcends racial, ethnic, and religious considerations. Indeed, some of the strongest public opposition to the meddling foreign policy he rightly condemns is found among recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

Despite such blemishes, Codevilla’s preferred foreign policy would be a decided improvement on our current bungling version. In addition to his important insights about grand strategy, he is correct that U.S. policymakers tend to overestimate the effectiveness of both economic sanctions and covert missions. The former frequently lead to measures that negatively impact innocent people in other countries while doing little to dissuade their governments from pursuing policies Washington dislikes. All too often, we end up with a strategy that is simultaneously provocative and ineffectual. The history of U.S. covert action, Codevilla accurately concludes, is one of “sorcerers’ apprentices stirring up and financing individuals and groups in the four corners of the world, who promptly went their own way.” The wreckage of such missions over the decades can be found in Iran and other locales in the Middle East as well as in our own hemisphere.

A nation that burdens itself with nearly 43 percent of all global military spending, that is experiencing a chronic fiscal bleed of more than half a trillion dollars a year, and that finds itself mired in numerous murky quarrels around the world, badly needs to reassess its foreign policy. Angelo Codevilla has provided an important, often perceptive, analysis of the extensive problems with America’s current approach. His contribution should serve as the springboard for an urgent, far-reaching debate.

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