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Trump Can Fix the Defects in U.S. Foreign Policy

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In administration after administration over the decades, U.S. foreign policy has habitually exhibited several of the same deficiencies. Although those defects and blind spots were evident throughout the Cold War, they have become more noticeable and worrisome since the end of that struggle. Today, they are glaringly apparent and even threaten to erode America's status as a superpower. Three deficiencies stand out as especially corrosive to the republic's best interests.

Threat Inflation

The failure of the Western democratic powers to anticipate and stifle the expansionist aggression of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan has left a lasting, profound impression on subsequent generations of U.S. policymakers. The devastating Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor made it difficult—and sometimes impossible—for those officials to overcome that lesson. The principal lesson they internalized was that they must strangle in the cradle any aggression by an authoritarian or totalitarian regime, lest it grow worse and result in another devastating world war.

The main problem with that historical lesson is that it is far too simplistic. Time after time, officials have proven unable to distinguish the difference between modest (or trivial) expansionist acts by autocratic regimes and truly dangerous threats to America's security or the international order. The nature of fascist aggression in the 1930s highlights the need to make such distinctions. Japan, Italy and Germany were major powers in the international system. Indeed, in the late 1930s, Germany had the world's second-largest economy (behind the United States) and, as the war soon showed, possessed an extremely effective military. Most dictatorial regimes, however obnoxious they might be, do not have capabilities that are remotely comparable.

Unfortunately, U.S. officials repeatedly conflate minor disruptive actors in the international system with major threats. Administration after administration has contended that a second- or third-rate tinpot dictator is "the next Hitler." During the 1960s, officials in Lyndon B. Johnson's administration saw North Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh in that role. More recently, leaders such as Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic and Iraq's Saddam Hussein were given that dubious distinction. Yet all of those leaders presided over small, weak countries, and not major powers.

Related to their habit of seeing a new Hitler under every bush is their tendency to view limited expansionist initiatives by such autocrats as posing dire security threats. Thus, U.S. leaders misinterpreted a nationalist civil war to unite an artificially divided Vietnam as a Soviet-Chinese major expansionist move that used North Vietnam as a proxy. American policymakers saw Iraq's 1990 invasion to absorb Kuwait, an entity that Iraq leaders for decades had insisted was part of their country, as an open-ended expansionist move to dominate the Middle East. Additionally, they viewed Belgrade's attempt to secure self-determination for Bosnian Serbs during Yugoslavia's disintegration—so that they did not have to live under a Muslim-dominated government—as an intolerable act of aggression.

Far greater and more sophisticated policy discrimination is urgent. Not every anti-American autocrat is the next Hitler. Not every expansionist move portends an unlimited expansionist agenda that poses a serious threat to America's security or its international stability.

An Inability to Set Priorities

Closely related to the habit of threat inflation is the chronic inability of U.S. policymakers to establish foreign-policy priorities. The extent of U.S. global obligations and the exposure to local or regional disputes illustrate the problem. The United States has committed itself to defend twenty-eight European nations through NATO. The European Union nations have economies larger than America's economy, and collectively have an economy nine times larger than Russia's economy. One would think that the democratic European powers should be capable of handling their own regional security.

Currently, the United States is waging a war in Afghanistan that has gone on for more than fifteen years without any discernible end in sight. Worse, that war has morphed from a punitive expedition to eradicate Al Qaeda following the September 2001 terrorist attack into an open-ended, nation-building mission to oppose the Taliban and prop up a corrupt regime in Kabul. U.S. troops have returned to Iraq and are involved in the war against ISIS. Washington, DC has at least one foot in the complex Syria conflict. The United States is still doing the heavy lifting for South Korea's defense against North Korea—and is exposed to Pyongyang's growing nuclear capability—even though the ROK is fully capable of building the forces it needs for its own defense. Washington, DC has even established within the Department of Defense a combatant command, known as Africa Command, which oversees department relations on the continent of Africa. That suggests that the U.S. military will become more deeply involved in that continent.

Worst of all, Washington's relations with both Russia and China are deteriorating. Overwrought members of the American foreign-policy community interpret Moscow's annexation of Crimea and support for insurgents in eastern Ukraine as a Hitler-like expansionist threat. U.S.-Russian relations are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Tensions between the United States and China are growing rapidly over relations with Taiwan, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and various trade issues. We are now in danger of being on very bad terms with China and Russia simultaneously. That would violate the wise admonition Henry Kissinger made in his memoir *Years of Upheaval* when he said that Washington, DC should always endeavor to have a closer relationship with Moscow and Beijing than they have with each other.

Current U.S. policy would seem to be the operational definition of strategic overextension. The need to do a better job of setting policy priorities has become urgent. Even a superpower can't defend everything and intervene everywhere. The United States already spends more on its military than any other nation. Indeed, it spends as much as the next eight countries combined—a list that includes Japan, Germany, Britain, France and Russia. President Trump has made it clear that he intends to spend even more money on the military. But given the vast (and growing) extent of the global obligations the United States has undertaken, even an enlarged military would be hard-pressed to do an effective job defending them. A pruning of those obligations and the launching of a serious effort to establish clearer priorities is imperative.

An Inability to Make Cost-Benefit or Risk-Reward Calculations

U.S. officials exhibit a chronic inability to distinguish between desirable outcomes and essential ones. Is it desirable for the Afghan people, who have suffered so much over the past four decades, to experience peace and provide new opportunities for girls and women? Of course. But those characteristics are not even marginally relevant, much less important, for America's security and well-being. Securing those values—even in the doubtful event that they could be secured—is certainly not worth a fifteen-year war that has cost more than a trillion dollars and thousands of American lives.

Similarly, one can hope that the Baltic states are able to continue their status as independent, democratic societies. But it is not worth the potential cost—much less the risk of a war with Russia that could turn nuclear—if relations between Moscow and those countries deteriorate. Likewise, one can empathize with Taiwan's aspiration to retain its de facto independence from China—especially so long as China remains a dictatorship. Still, supporting Taiwan is not central enough to U.S. security to risk a war with China—one that could be extremely destructive and disrupt the global economic system.

Once again, U.S. policymakers need to do a better job of assessing American interests and distinguishing between vital interests and lesser ones. The expenditure of trillions of dollars and tens of thousands of American lives in places like Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq ought to be a stark reminder of what happens when policymakers can't or won't do prudent cost-benefit and risk-reward calculations.

The Trump administration has an opportunity to correct the defects in U.S. foreign policy. During the campaign, Donald Trump provided some intriguing hints that he was prepared to rethink America's overgrown commitments. But words are cheap. Actions require a more serious effort.

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