



The Realist Prism: Despite Austerity, U.S. Military Restraint Is Unlikely

By [Nikolas Gvosdev](#) | 19 Aug 2011

It is amusing to hear U.S. politicians of all ideological stripes sounding like classic libertarians as they proclaim that, in these times of fiscal austerity, the United States [should no longer act as the "world's policeman"](#) and that other countries should be contributing "their fair share" to global security. Nevertheless, the many studies undertaken by the fellows of [the Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank, detailing how the United States can shift to becoming an "offshore balancer," thereby reducing its footprint around the world, and how our European and East Asian allies can afford to do more in the service of their own defense, continue to gather dust on the shelves, with no sign that either the Congress or the executive branch is really interested in implementing them.



The gap between rhetoric and reality could soon lead to an untenable situation. [As Stephen Glain puts it](#), "The commitment to project force across every strategic waterway, air corridor and land bridge has exhausted the U.S. military and will be even harder to sustain as budget cuts force strategists and logisticians to do more with less. A national discussion about the logic of maintaining huge forward bases, to say nothing of their financial and human costs, is long overdue."

Historically, when faced with severe financial and resource constraints, major powers have begun a process of shrinking commitments and making very clear distinctions between vital interests and secondary ones. An example is Britain's decision to abandon its positions "east of Suez" during the government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Indeed, there are several different, competing approaches available to the United States, such as hemispheric consolidation or a focus on the Pacific basin, with a corresponding downgrade to the European and Middle Eastern theaters. Yet official Washington is loath to undertake this process. Reducing U.S. obligations abroad in order to rebuild America's economic and technological base of strength at home is a goal that candidates often cite on the campaign trail and one that enjoys tremendous popular support. But it is quickly forgotten once zealous campaigners have become officeholders comfortably ensconced in Washington. Time and again, the U.S. has demonstrated its unwillingness to prioritize its foreign policy interests. By claiming that all our interests are in one form or another vital, we render the very word itself meaningless.

What explains this? "Clientitis," or the willingness of U.S. officials to regard another country as a client of the United States and to rationalize continued engagement as being in the best interests of the United States, provides a partial explanation. The phenomenal growth of the Washington lobby industry has aided in this process, as other countries find increasingly effective ways to make their case on Capitol Hill.

Another contributing factor is the habit of underestimating the actual costs of maintaining the current American global security architecture. The Libya operation is a good example. Expected to be over within days, it has gone on for months, and at costs that far exceed what was originally projected.

Finally, the United States has no clear successor to which it can pass along some of its global security responsibilities, along the lines of the British handoff to the U.S. following World War II. The U.S. does not yet have a sufficiently well-developed relationship with either Brazil or India, for instance, to engage in such a transition in the southern Atlantic and Indian oceans. Vice President Joe Biden, currently in China to take the temperature of Xi Jinping, the country's presumptive next president, [might declare](#), "There's no more important relationship that we need to establish on the part of the United States than the close relationship with China." But it is unlikely that Beijing will play a collaborative role with Washington in terms of international security anytime soon.

But the biggest problem facing the U.S. national security community is its embrace of a particular version of the "butterfly effect," by which any situation anywhere in the world can be considered a threat to U.S. vital interests. This fuels the belief that unless the United States intervenes to deal with "small problems" in "remote areas," they will inevitably metastasize into major security threats to the U.S. homeland. President Barack Obama's speech on Libya in May exemplified this approach: Citing the U.S. as the "anchor of global security," [Obama declared](#) that Moammar Gadhafi's actions in Libya, if left unchecked, "would have reverberated across the region." Usually implicit in such assessments is the sentiment that if other nations choose not to act, the United States must.

Stephen Walt [characterizes this mindset](#) as "constantly hammering home the idea that we are terribly vulnerable to events in far-flung countries a world away." Daniel Larison [reinforces this point by noting](#) that "the presumption that the U.S. must provide global 'leadership' leads the U.S. to go far beyond protecting its 'vital' interests, so that it can no longer properly discern what is essential and what is extraneous."

Moving forward, one way to avoid the Scylla of hyper-interventionism on one hand and the Charybdis of isolationism on the other is to redefine the U.S. global security role from being the world's "first responder" to being its trusted back-up partner. As my colleague Derek Reveron [has observed](#), "Expansionist interpretations of U.S. military strategy fail to take into account the supporting role the U.S. provides friends, allies and almost every country in the world." By strengthening the capabilities of partner states, we could create a series of regional "firewalls" to hem in various threats.

Whether this approach will take root is another story. Rep. Barney Frank [has argued](#) that "military overspending has been a bipartisan mistake that needs a bipartisan response," but most U.S. politicians line up with Tim Pawlenty, [who recently declared](#), "I'm not for shrinking America's presence in the world. I'm for making sure America remains the world leader."

So while there is a great deal of talk about budget-cutting and belt-tightening in Washington, no strategic shift is likely soon.

Nikolas K. Gvosdev is the former editor of the National Interest, and a frequent foreign policy commentator in both the print and broadcast media. He is currently on the faculty of the U.S. Naval War College. The views expressed are his own and do not reflect those of the Navy or the U.S. government. His weekly WPR column, [The Realist Prism](#), appears every Friday.

Photo: Vice President Joe Biden with Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping, Beijing, China, Aug. 18, 2011 (Official White House Photo by David Lienemann).