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Sharing The Security Burden

By [Joel Davis](#)

Thursday, December 10 3:46 pm EST



President Obama received his Nobel Prize today and in his [acceptance speech](#) he acknowledged the irony of a wartime president receiving the peace prize while offering no apology for escalating the war in Afghanistan. Instead, he made a rousing [defense of the just war doctrine](#) and again placed the conflict in Afghanistan in the context of the history of U.S. efforts to maintain and preserve world security:

But the world must remember that it was not simply international institutions — not just treaties and declarations — that brought stability to a post-World War II world. Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace and prosperity from Germany to Korea, and enabled democracy to take hold in places like the Balkans. We have borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will. We have done so out of

enlightened self-interest — because we seek a better future for our children and grandchildren, and we believe that their lives will be better if others’ children and grandchildren can live in freedom and prosperity.

Yet at a time when the U.S. is fighting two wars, negotiating two nuclear crises, and dealing with a climate crisis along with a major economic recession all at the same time, is there a danger that the U.S. is becoming overextended? In “[Restraining Order: For Strategic Modesty](#)” Harvey Sapolsky, Benjamin Friedman, Eugene Gholz, and Daryl Press argue for a new strategic response to all of this, a shift away from global hyper-engagement towards a policy of restraint in the use of American power:

Restraint would offer the opportunity to reinvigorate the foundations of America’s strength. Foreign distractions, among other causes, have led the United States to neglect its transportation infrastructure, its educational system, its finances, and its technology base. If we were to restrain the global interventionism that has become our second nature since the end of World War II, we could ensure our safety while preserving our power to deal more precisely with threats that may materialize in an uncertain future. The first virtue of a restraint strategy is that it husbands American power. It acknowledges both America’s great strengths—a combination of human and physical resources unmatched in the world—and the limitations of our power, which is easily dissipated in wasteful attempts to manage global security.

They go on to argue that it’s time to call on our allies and partners to take on a greater share of the burden of our common security interests while denying that this approach amounts to a call for isolationism or pacifism. It’s certainly wise to carefully husband our resources, we should not be careless with what has taken generations to build, so I do feel this is a debate worth having. On the other hand, I can’t help but wonder if the old axiom is still true with respect to power: use it or lose it?

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