

# THINKPROGRESS

## How To Think About The Future Of American Foreign Policy

By: Zack Beauchamp – October 30, 2013

There's a fascinating exchange in the most recent edition of *International Security* that tells us a lot about the coming debate over America's role in the world. People tend to think it's about the size of our military or the frequency of armed interventions, but that's not quite right: the real action in U.S. foreign policy is going to center around basing and alliances, not military spending *per se*.

The debate centers on an article by Stephen Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth in which the three eminent scholars defend the U.S.'s role as global (mostly) benevolent hegemon. The exchange consists of two replies, by Campbell Craig and Justin Logan, Benjamin Friedman, and Brendan Green respectively, and a doubling-down by Brooks et al.

The most interesting passage opens Brooks et al.'s response:

The responses by Campbell Craig and Benjamin Friedman, Brendan Rittenhouse Green, and Justin Logan to our recent article advance the debate on U.S. grand strategy, and not only in the usual way—by highlighting contending claims and assessments—but also by revealing areas of agreement.<sup>1</sup> **Given their support for “a U.S. military with global reach far exceeding any rival,” it is clear that both we and Friedman et al. are “primacists.” Like us, they do not expect the rise of peer competitors or U.S. relative decline to erode the position of the United States as the world's number one military power, nor do they favor defense cuts sufficient to restrict U.S. military action to its own region.** Both we and Friedman et al. are also in favor of “restraint” in the use of American power. **Like us, they see military interventions in places such as Haiti and Kosovo as optional choices that are outside our preferred grand strategy's logic. The debate is clearly not about primacy or restraint as these terms are conventionally understood. It is about whether the United States should remain deeply engaged in the security affairs of East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe or should instead retrench, abrogating its alliances with its security partners.**

This is an accurate rendering of the basic disagreement in the essays, and a revealing one. Logan and his coauthors consider themselves fairly radical critics of American foreign policy, given to scathing criticisms of “the bipartisan foreign-policy consensus.” In their contribution to the debate, they write that “modern advocates of a U.S. grand strategy of restraint have not influenced U.S. policy much,” suggesting that their vision of the scale and scope of American power puts them on the fringes of American political conversation.

And yet, even self-styled radical critics endorse a vision of a U.S. military so powerful that its “global reach” far outstrips every other nation on Earth. Meanwhile, Brooks and company — the stand-ins for the “establishment” view in this debate, concede to the radicals that many of America's recent wars have been ill-advised.

So everyone agrees the U.S. should maintain the world's strongest military, but use it a bit less. The participants disagree on the precise amount of military assets to maintain and interventions to cut back on, but that's hardly the stuff of "grand strategic" debate. Where's the beef?

The answer is in Brooks et al.'s last sentence in that quote. This debate is about whether America should remain politically involved in disputes around the world, attempting to take the lead in helping produce a better outcome, or back away and only concern itself with its direct interests.

There are two main determinants of American political involvement in foreign disputes. The first is our system of alliances: our relationship with Israel and the Gulf states tie us to the Middle East, NATO makes us a player in Europe, and security guarantees to Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea link the United States to Asian politics. It's these political commitments, not the size of our military itself, that commits the United States to a policy of active involvement in regional politics around the world.

The political commitments are underwritten by bases. The U.S. has some kind of military presence in 75 percent of countries around the world. Though even the Pentagon wants to scale that down substantially, the basic fact that America's got bases around the world allows policymakers to militarily back up their political commitments.

Put differently, the U.S. could have the exact same number of tanks, aircraft carriers, and nuclear missiles as it does now but be unable to use them to rapidly project power abroad if they're all parked in Pearl Harbor and El Paso.

Bases and alliances build on each other, locking the United States into something like its current global leadership role. If the U.S. wants to have bases in a country, it needs to have a good, or at least working, political relationship with the country's leaders. And certain political arrangements, like the U.S.-South Korea relationship, depend on U.S. forward deployment.

Transforming America's role in the world, then, really means shuttering bases and withdrawing from alliances, not cutting down on military spending or interventions. How Americans resolve the question of where they want to put their troops and who, if anyone, they want to be friends with will be the defining question for 21st century American foreign policy.