

Should the U.S. welcome a smaller global presence?



By [Philip Ewing](#) Monday, June 6th, 2011 8:55 am
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Many Washington commentators dread the coming of Austerity America; they mourn what they fear will be the passing of America's global reach and the apogee of its power. Not Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute, whose column in Defense News seems to celebrate what he argues will be a needed rebalancing of American military power with that of the rest of the world.

In his warnings about potential cuts to DoD's budget, Secretary Gates "exaggerates the threats facing us, and he misconstrues the benefits that we derive from our enormous military," Preble writes. America's enormous military spending just entices the rest of the world to let it carry all the burden, he argues, which in turn puts still more of a burden on American taxpayers. But America can shed a lot of that power and still remain very secure, [Preble says](#):

What makes us secure? The combination of nuclear weapons and favorable geography. We can effectively rule out the prospect of land invasion (most countries can't), and a million-man amphibious operation from the sea is extremely unlikely. Any leader foolish enough to launch an overt attack on the United States would have to get past the Navy and the Air Force. These forces exist to deter attacks, and win a decisive military victory if deterrence fails.

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This raises the old "Red Dawn" argument about whether the continental U.S. is actually impervious to invasion, but let's set that aside for a moment. What Preble is saying is that Americans and their leaders should return to a time when they were worried only about the

defense of the continental United States, and not about the maintenance of America's global empire. Although Gates argues that American power is the surest guarantor of international stability, Preble says that the world will remain stable because other countries will step in to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of so much American force:

Gates suggests that shedding certain roles and missions, and shifting burdens to others, entails intolerable risks. People in other countries might choose not to direct some money from generous social welfare programs to defense. Perhaps they will refuse to share some of the costs of keeping the oceans free from pirates, or fail to keep local troublemakers in their respective boxes.

According to Gates, that is a risk not worth taking. He seems to believe that every problem, no matter how small or distant, will inevitably arrive on our shores. Therefore, we cannot rely on other countries to do more — or anything, really — to defend themselves and their interests ... But our military power doesn't do all that he says that it does, and understanding the limits of that power is both prudent and wise. The United States is an exceptional nation, but we are not the indispensable nation.

Today, American taxpayers provide half of the world's military spending, while our share of the global economy has fallen to less than one quarter. It isn't realistic to expect 5 percent of the world's population to bear these costs indefinitely. Gates seems to think that it is, or, at least, that there is no alternative. But if there is no alternative to U.S. power, then that is largely a problem of our own making. And it is one that we can solve.

Gates failed to do so; it is not clear that he even tried. Here's hoping that his successor does.

What do you think?