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Our Unrealistic Foreign Policy

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U.S. foreign policy is crippled by a dramatic disconnect between what Americans expect of it and what the nation's leaders are giving them. If U.S. policymakers don't address this gap, they risk pursuing a policy whose ends don't match with the means the American people are willing to provide.

What is our foreign policy? Leadership. That word appears 35 times in President Obama's latest [National Security Strategy](#).

His predecessors have all wanted the same thing, although most managed to work in a few more synonyms.

At the dawn of the post-Cold War era, officials in the George H.W. Bush administration aspired for the United States to be the sole global power. Now that the nation's long-time rival had disappeared, the object of U.S. foreign policy, according to an early draft of the [Defense Planning Guidance](#), was to "prevent the re-emergence of a new rival" capable of challenging U.S. power in any vital area, including Western Europe, Asia, or the territory of the former Soviet Union. To accomplish this task, the United States would retain preponderant military power, not merely to deter attacks against the United States, but also to deter "potential competitors" – including long-time U.S. allies such as Germany and Japan – "from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role."

Echoing those sentiments a few years later, Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan characterized the proper U.S. role in the world as "[benevolent global hegemony](#)." "The aspiration to benevolent hegemony," they conceded in their famous *Foreign Affairs* essay from 1996, "might strike some as either hubristic or morally suspect. But a hegemon is nothing more or less than a leader with preponderant influence and authority over all others in its domain."

Kristol and Kagan claimed, "Most of the world's major powers welcome U.S. global involvement and prefer America's benevolent hegemony to the alternatives." Indeed, they continued, "The principal concern of America's allies these days is not that it will be too dominant but that it will withdraw."

That latter point has never been tested: U.S. troops have remained in Europe and Asia, and the U.S. military presence expanded in other regions. But whether it is good for others doesn't necessarily make it good for us. For the most part, American taxpayers, and especially American troops, have borne the burdens of "benevolent hegemony," while U.S. allies have been content to focus their attention on domestic spending, while their underfunded defenses languish.

Modern-day advocates of our current foreign policy opt for a less grandiose name – "deep engagement" – but the substance is the same as that advocated by Kristol and Kagan from nearly two decades ago. And the fact that U.S. foreign policy encourages other countries to neglect their defenses continues to be its key selling point.

"By reassuring allies and actively managing regional relations," Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth explain, "Washington dampens competition in the world's key areas, thereby preventing the emergence of a hothouse in which countries would grow new military capabilities."

According to this view, the fact that U.S. allies have chosen not to invest in their own defenses is the clearest sign that the strategy is working as intended. "Since 1991," Brooks and his co-authors enthuse, U.S. allies "have kept their military expenditures as a percentage of GDP to historic lows."

Curb Your Enthusiasm

Because U.S. security guarantees to wealthy allies have caused them to under-provide for their own defense, they also have less capacity to deal with common security challenges, from ethnic violence in the Balkans in the late 1990s to combatting terrorism and piracy in the Middle East, South Asia, or the Horn of Africa today.

But that isn't the main flaw underlying U.S. foreign policy today. Cheerleaders for benevolent hegemony contend that Americans are inclined to carry these burdens indefinitely, a function of American exceptionalism combined with a pervasive culture of weakness among our allies.

"The American people can be summoned to meet the challenges of global leadership," Kristol and Kagan concluded in 1996, "if statesmen make the case loudly, cogently, and persistently."

American "statesmen" have typically opted for a different approach. They tend to sell U.S. foreign policy through misdirection and subterfuge to the extent that they ever talk about it at all.

Astute observers of U.S. foreign policy understand why elites have neglected to make the case loudly, cogently, or persistently; the American people haven't bought into this ambitious global mission, and they are unlikely to ever do so. Nor is it clear that other countries welcome U.S. leadership as much as the advocates of global hegemony contend.

The key problem with “benevolent hegemony,” Francis Fukuyama explained in his book, *America at the Crossroads*, is that it “rests on a belief in American exceptionalism that most non-Americans simply find not credible.” He continued, “The idea that the United States behaves disinterestedly on the world stage is not widely believed because it is for the most part not true and, indeed, could not be true if American leaders fulfill their responsibilities to the American people.”

Even strong advocates of global hegemony concede that it might not be realistic to expect Americans to bear the burdens of global governance indefinitely.

For Americans, Michael Mandelbaum grudgingly admitted in his book, *The Case for Goliath*, our own “nation’s interests have priority.” This “does not bespeak unusual financial stinginess or moral callousness: Americans approach the world much as other people do. . . . For the American public, foreign policy, like charity, begins at home.” For that reason, above all others, Mandelbaum predicted, “the American role in the world may depend in part on Americans not scrutinizing it too closely.”

Clearer Than the Truth

The inclination to conceal the true object of U.S. foreign policy has a long pedigree. When the Truman administration was pondering ways to rally public support for the nascent Cold War, Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan advised Secretary of State Dean Acheson to “scare hell out of the American people” by painting a picture of the global communist menace that was, in Acheson’s telling, “clearer than the truth.”

It isn’t necessarily wrong to believe that U.S. foreign policy can be sustained by obfuscation, threat inflation, and the hope that the public won’t pay attention. Americans are “rationally ignorant” about most public policies, and especially so when it comes to foreign policy.

There are occasions, however, when the public rises up – as it did in the late summer of 2013, when nearly everyone in Washington was making the case for strikes against Bashar Assad’s government and military in Syria, and nearly everyone outside of the Beltway’s pleasant environs was screaming “Hell no.”

Still, on the whole, information asymmetry works to the advantage of those calling for a hegemonic global posture and frequent foreign intervention. The explosion on the *USS Maine* in 1898 and a curious episode involving U.S. naval vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, were sufficient to rally the public to the war hawks’ cries. The truth about those incidents was revealed long after. We can expect similar murky incidents to serve as the rationale for attacks on any number of modern-day boogeymen: from Iran’s mad mullahs to North Korea’s crazy Kims.

But foreign policy should be communicated honestly and openly to the people who will pay its costs.

For example, can we create and sustain occasional alliances with less-than-perfect allies, without having to claim falsely that they are, in fact, perfect? And that their interests always align perfectly with our own?

Can our leaders make the case for a hegemonic grand strategy without resorting to threat inflation? Or must every tin-pot dictator (at least the ones we don't actively support) be the next Adolf Hitler? Must every possible cyber-/bio-/WMD-incident be the equivalent of Pearl Harbor? Must every negotiation be Munich?

Can U.S. elites credibly claim that the economic benefits of U.S. foreign policy greatly outweigh the costs? The assertion that U.S. hegemony delivers a net gain to the U.S. economy was always on shaky ground – and is shakier still.

In short, if the core rationale of our grand strategy remains, as it has been, to discourage other countries from defending themselves, can our leaders explain it that way to the American people and sustain popular support?

And if there is a risk that a particular policy or military operation abroad, undertaken primarily to defend allied interests, will undermine U.S. security or prosperity, or threaten major restrictions on Americans' domestic liberty, can our leaders definitively demonstrate that the risks are heavily offset by the rewards?

Strategy = Ends + Ways + Means

In the debate over military spending that is now raging, it is generally assumed that our foreign policy, and thus the roles and missions that we assign to our military, will remain unchanged – or at least will not become less onerous. It is unreasonable to expect our military to do the same, or more, with less. It is unfair to the troops and their families. Thus the current push to dramatically increase the Pentagon's budget. It would be shameful, write Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) and Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-TX) in a Wall Street Journal op-ed, to ask “the country's military men and women to do their jobs with shrinking resources.” The respective chairs of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, citing the statements of senior military leaders, declare that the military “cannot execute the National Military Strategy” “with defense spending at sequestration levels.”

That broader point bears repeating: the military says that it cannot execute the National Military Strategy under the current resource constraints. And the only alternative, McCain and Thornberry imply, is to remove those constraints.

But political elites assign roles and missions for the military. They are not handed down from heaven. They are not carved on stone tablets. They are a function of a nation's grand strategy and informed by the dominant intellectual paradigms at a given point in time.

That grand strategy must take account of the resources that can be made available to execute it. Bryan McGrath contends with emphasis that "it is the *job* of the grand strategist" to make the case for more resources if current spending is insufficient "to achieving the desired ends" – suggesting again that those "desired ends" are immutable. Wise strategists, McGrath explains, would call on the public to "re-allocate resources away from less critical uses to more critical uses" in order to close the means-ends gap.

As a practical matter, this entails telling the American people to accept cuts in popular domestic programs, higher taxes, or both, so that our allies can maintain their bloated domestic spending and neglect their defenses. Some politician might attempt such a feat, but he or she is unlikely to prevail. Americans have grown tired of waging wars on behalf of other nations. They are unwilling to pay the costs of being the world's policeman. The logical recourse, therefore, would be to reconsider that global policing role, encourage other countries to defend themselves and their interests, and bring the object of our foreign policy in line with the public's wishes.

"Defending our allies' security" ranked near the bottom of Americans' foreign policy priorities, just one percentage point above "Strengthening the United Nations," in the Chicago Council on World Affairs most recent poll (Figure 2.4, p. 22). A core object of U.S. foreign policy since the end of World War II has been to reassure nervous allies, and thus discourage them from acquiring military capabilities that they might want for defense were we not there. And yet more Americans believe in "limiting climate change" than in limiting our allies' desire to defend themselves.

It's no wonder, then, that elites don't want Americans to scrutinize our foreign policy more closely. But the worst thing that they could do is persist with that policy and refuse to ask the public to pay for it.

And yet, that is precisely what they appear to be doing.

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