

Understanding the Limits of American Power

Christopher Preble | 22 Mar 2011

For many years, the United States has been the world's most powerful nation. It remains the undisputed global leader in military power and still possesses vast economic and cultural influence. And while Washington's ability to combine both hard and soft power to influence world events -- what Joseph Nye calls "smart power" -- has diminished somewhat, it is still in a far superior position relative to any other country.



U.S. primacy, however, comes with opportunity costs. An alternate path might have delivered a comparable level of security at far less expense and risk. Even many who unabashedly celebrate our 20-year "unipolar moment" admit that their approach is costly and that it cannot last forever. They were the ones, after all, who dubbed it but a moment.

Rather than trying to make that moment last, U.S. policymakers should adopt policies that will allow us to extricate ourselves from regional squabbles, while maintaining the ability both to prevent genuine threats to the United States from forming and to deal with them decisively when prevention fails. Instead, even many who advocate for a smart power approach seem to assume that its goal should be to allow the United States to continue as the world's superpower -- and its policeman -- for the indefinite future.

But there is nothing smart about paying to underwrite the security of the entire world while the true source of our power -- our vibrant and dynamic economy -- is steadily eroding. The crushing burden of our debt is, in the words of the Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Michael Mullen, "The most significant threat to our national security." Closing the gap between what the government spends and what it takes in from citizens in taxes is imperative. Pentagon spending, which has nearly doubled in the past decades, must be on the table in the search for savings. We can responsibly reduce the size and cost of our military without undermining U.S. security, if we commit to rethinking its purpose. But it would be a mistake to downsize the Department of Defense without adopting a more modest strategy, otherwise we would just be overburdening the military without improving security.

The U.S. armed forces have responded impressively and honorably to the many burdens we have placed on them in the past 15 years. But a strategy that maintains the current total levels of U.S. ground forces, on the assumption that the U.S. military should prepare for further long-term foreign deployments on the scale of Iraq and Afghanistan, gets it backward. We need to reduce the strain on our men and women in uniform, not commit them to dubious missions requiring many more of them than we have. What makes our power "smart" is not what we have, but how we use it.

A shift to a [grand strategy of restraint](#) would make sense even in an era of budget surpluses, and it is especially appropriate as large-scale operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are brought to a close over the next few years. A national security strategy that is less prone to large-scale conventional military interventions would allow the United States to avoid the very sorts of nation-building missions -- such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan -- that a majority of Americans now wisely oppose. And a more reticent or circumspect posture toward future interventions would induce more responsibility among our stable, wealthy allies who have grown overly dependent on the U.S. military for their security.

Instead, most foreign policy scholars in Washington cling to the unipolar fantasy. They believe that our power confers upon us the ability to fundamentally shape the global order at relatively low cost. Through our faith in

our ability to proactively solve problems, we expand our definitions of what constitutes our national interest and make other countries' security challenges our own. Americans generally are not content to tolerate threats that seem tolerable to weaker states. We actively seek to solve problems, and we believe that we have the power to do so. This confidence has been battered, but not broken, by the challenges we have faced in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And yet, Washington's stubborn insistence upon expanding the mission in Afghanistan, even while U.S. officials [ponder a residual force in Iraq](#) of more than 25,000 military and civilian personnel, reveals a degree of hubris that should shock any objective observer. It is not merely that the wars are costly. Equally troubling is that these wars are, at their core, attempts to use U.S. military power to transform entire societies. And while most defenders of these missions concede that neither country will resemble a Jeffersonian democracy anytime soon, the debate over whether the wars have been worth the cost centers on a misreading of the lessons learned from these long conflicts.

The bitter American experience in Iraq and Afghanistan [reaffirms the need for a new national security strategy](#), not merely better tactics and tools to serve the current one. Other state-building missions will not pose the same challenges, but all such missions are very costly, and the vast majority of them fail. Arguments that we can remake foreign countries overlook the limits on our military power that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have exposed. And by heeding those arguments, we risk repeating our mistakes. The main lesson to be learned from our recent forays into nation-building should be a greater appreciation for the limits of military power.

The good news is that most such interventions are unnecessary. By any objective measure, the United States is enormously secure -- in spite of our overseas military adventures, not because of them. If anything, our hyperactive foreign policy of the past 20 years has impeded us from spreading the ideas that make this country great. This should dictate a change in course toward a wise foreign policy that combines prudence and forbearance.

At the close of the Cold War, one of the architects of the American strategy of containment in that struggle issued a similar warning. "The United States should conduct itself," wrote diplomat and historian George F. Kennan, "as befits a country of its size and importance." Kennan wrote that U.S. foreign policy should be characterized by "patience, generosity, and a uniformly accommodating spirit in dealing with small countries and small matters," as well as by "reasonableness, consistency, and steady adherence to principle in dealings with large countries and large matters."

Kennan concluded, "The greatest service this country could render to the rest of the world would be to put its own house in order and to make of American civilization an example of decency, humanity and societal success."

Our challenge now is to match our power to our purpose. We must come to understand our power as a means to an end and shape it accordingly. We should not pursue more power than we need, and we should husband what we have with the utmost care.

Thomas Jefferson voiced similar sentiments in 1815 when he predicted that, in the not so distant future, Americans "may shake a rod over the heads of all, which may make the stoutest of them tremble. But I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power, the greater it will be."

Jefferson's thinking is reflected today in efforts to define power broadly -- to include not merely our power to intimidate or destroy through force of arms, but also our vibrant culture and our extensive economic engagement with the world. For those who once believed that military power keeps us safe, and that more power will keep us safer, Nye's smart power approach provides an appropriately nuanced answer: not

necessarily. This thinking appreciates that the United States' true strength, the true source of U.S. power, is its people. Our spirit, our generosity and our ingenuity are expressed in countless ways, most of which have nothing to do with our military prowess.

Still, worrisome signs are on the horizon. The growing gap between those in Washington who make our policies, and the taxpayers and troops who pay the price of carrying them out, should be of particular concern to the proponents of smart power. The damage from a populist backlash against Washington's interventionism, should it come, will seriously erode our ability to pursue that rightly celebrated approach.

It would be tragic as well as dangerous if Americans rejected the peaceful coexistence, trade and private-sector exchanges and contact that have been the true strength of U.S. foreign policy since the nation's founding. To do so would only cause the gap between the United States and the rest of the world to grow wider, with negative ramifications for U.S. security for many years to come.

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Photo: President Barack Obama with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, March 27, 2009 (White House photo by Lawrence L. Jackson).