

Do Americans need to adapt to America in decline?

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Christopher Preble is that rarest of creatures inside the Beltway: a serious thinker who genuinely challenges conventional wisdom in foreign policy without scorn or ridicule. Read his book, "**The Power Problem**," for confirmation of this claim.

This weekend, **Preble had a provocative essay** in the New York Times Sunday Review. He argued that American foreign policy during the post-Cold War era has been predicated on American primacy. That is not very controversial; I doubt someone like, say, Charles Krauthammer, would disagree. In the provocative part of his essay, Preble asks the foreign policy community to seriously consider transitioning to a post-primacy grand strategy:

*America's insistence upon maintaining primacy at all costs may stimulate greater resistance from the likes of China and Russia. And the risk that the United States gets drawn into wars that it need not fight and cannot win will remain high, no matter how much we spend. We are faced with the prospect, then, of frequent uses of force — like the missile strike against suspected Syrian chemical weapons sites this month that even supporters admitted was unlikely, by itself, **to accomplish much**. ...*

America should seek a new arrangement that asks the beneficiaries of today's relatively peaceful and prosperous world order to make a meaningful contribution to maintaining it. The American security umbrella will stay aloft — and American military power will remain formidable — but others will need to do more.

Rather than treating allies like reckless teenagers who can't be trusted without Uncle Sam's constant supervision, or feckless weaklings that will jump at the chance to capitulate to rapacious neighbors, Washington should empower mature, like-minded states to deal with local challenges before they become regional or global crises

The United States is the most important country in the world and will remain so for many years by virtue of its strong economy and prodigious military capabilities. But admitting that the United States is incapable of effectively adjudicating every territorial dispute or of thwarting every security threat in every part of the world is hardly tantamount to surrender. It is, rather, a wise admission of the limits of American power and an acknowledgment of the need to share the burdens, and the responsibilities, of dealing with a complex world. It is about seizing the opportunity to make changes that benefit us and others.

For anyone who has perused the boatload of books about American decline in recent years, the appeal of Preble's argument would be obvious. I have made the case elsewhere that **the benefits of military primacy have been exaggerated.**

Still, much as I'd love to agree with Preble's thesis, I cannot, for two big reasons.

The more immediate reason is that I seriously doubt the ability of U.S. allies to shoulder the burden that Preble wants them to shoulder. As I argued in "**The System Worked,**" the chief effect of the 2008 financial crisis on the global distribution of power wasn't the erosion of American power but the significant drop-off in the power of our key allies. Preble's argument would have carried greater weight a decade ago. In that time, our allies have become more indebted, while the security threats to them have grown.

It is not that I don't want the allies to kick in more to their own defense. I do, although **this argument has always struck me as overblown.** Rather, our key allies in Europe and the Pacific Rim have fewer capabilities to help out than before. Moreover, they do not exactly have a sterling track record of successful policy coordination on security matters. In the Pacific Rim, Japan and South Korea still barely talk to each other about North Korea. No matter how many times European foreign and defense ministers say **PESCO,** our **European allies remain fragmented** on what to do about security matters. The European Union has not figured out how to handle internal challenges such as Hungary, and it has far greater leverage there than it does in dealing with external threats.

Europe and the Pacific Rim are not far-flung security theaters. They are pretty vital to American security, and they are coping with great powers that are either rising (China) or super-revisionist (Russia). The case for retrenchment seemed strong a decade ago. It is much weaker now.

The other big reason is that I remain less convinced than Preble that American primacy is threatened. There are pillars of American power that still remain potent. U.S. military supremacy remains pretty potent. So does U.S. financial hegemony. Primacy in guns and treasure is no small thing. Those who advocate for retrenchment focus on the cost of post-Cold War military spending, but they tend to use absolute measures rather than relative ones. As a percent of GDP, U.S. defense spending is **roughly half** of what it was during the Reagan era. Of the reasons for America's relative decline, military spending and **deep engagement** are pretty far down the list.

Some elements of American power face severe challenges. Preble is right to point out the perception of American decline. That is even more powerful **domestically** than it is **internationally.** Donald Trump's stated ambition to make America great again would have some positive foreign policy spillovers if he was successful. The problem, of course, is that in this area **he is the opposite of successful.**

Preble is correct to nudge the foreign policy community into thinking about the contours of a post-primacy world. His colleagues at Cato have made **persuasive arguments** that American foreign policymakers might be overly focused with status and prestige, which makes even talking about decline a politically explosive topic. It sure would be nice if the foreign policy establishment bolstered America's nonmilitary instruments of statecraft. That said, Preble's

proposed shift in grand strategy would not yield great gains and would be likely to introduce some serious long-term headaches.