



## No More Of The Same: The Problem With Primacy

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A suicide bombing in Yemen kills scores of new military recruits. Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov has suffered a brain hemorrhage. Nuclear-armed North Korea tests ballistic missiles. Venezuela is in a political and economic death spiral. The civil war in Syria drags into its fifth year, and only seems to get worse. In each case, a worried world asks: "What is the United States going to do?"

U.S. policymakers have invited this response. For decades, U.S. foreign policy has followed a quixotic goal of primacy, or global hegemony. It presumes that the United States is the indispensable nation, and that every problem, in any part of the world, must be resolved by U.S. leadership or else will impact American safety.

But primacy has proved both difficult and costly. It is also frequently disconnected from American security needs.

An alternative approach to global affairs would concentrate on vital U.S. national interests and maintain the tools necessary to defend them. It would also reject the need for global hegemony. The idea that we can only be safe once the world is remade in our image is riddled with logical fallacies. Moreover, an interests-driven foreign policy would take seriously the consequences of our actions abroad and here at home — on our soldiers, our fiscal health, and our principles.

Instead of asking, whenever a distant crisis breaks, "What is the United States going to do?" we should ask, first, "How does this affect vital U.S. national interests?" and, second, "In light of recent developments, what *can* the United States do, while remaining prosperous and relatively safe, and what *must* others do to protect themselves?"

This might seem like common sense, but it runs counter to the foreign policy thinking among American elites. They argue that America's dominant position in the international system is good not only for America but also for the world. A large, expensive, and globally deployed military is designed to smother potential peer competitors and stop prospective threats before they materialize. Primacy also requires a globe-girdling array of allies and the active spread of liberal values. It even means "resisting, and where possible, undermining, rising dictators and hostile ideologies" through frequent military interventions, as primacists Robert Kagan and Bill Kristol have argued. They are comfortable going to war even "when we cannot prove that a narrowly construed 'vital interest' of the United States is at stake."

Primacists hold that it would simply be too dangerous to allow allied countries to defend themselves or independently assert their interests; therefore, the United States must do it for them. Though such a strategy encourages free riding, primacists are more worried by the prospect that allies' self-defense efforts might fail, necessitating more costly U.S. intervention later and under less favorable circumstances. U.S. security guarantees, the primacists say, tamp down the natural inclination of states to want to provide security for themselves, thus preventing allies from engaging in arms build-ups that might unsettle their neighbors, perhaps even unleashing regional arms races.

Unfortunately — but predictably given what theory and history teach us — primacy has been neither easy to implement nor cheap to sustain. When the U.S. military is called upon to fight wars across the globe, the human toll is considerable. Since 9/11 and through 2014, nearly 7,000 U.S. troops have been killed, 52,000 have been wounded in action, and close to a million veterans have registered disability claims.

The fiscal burdens of primacy are severe as well. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan cost the United States trillions of dollars, some of which we will be paying for many decades in the form of additional debt servicing and veteran care. And primacy guarantees more fighting in the future — and the bills that come with it.

Of course, we ought to have a strong defense. But, under primacy, the U.S. military is expected both to stop threats from materializing and to stomp out any fires it fails to prevent. That expectation requires us to maintain the world's largest and most active military. Notwithstanding the false claims that the Budget Control Act is responsible for "gutting national defense", or the widespread belief that the U.S. military has been hollowed out and needs to be rebuilt, the U.S. military is the preeminent fighting force in the world. No state can match U.S. global power-projection capabilities. And U.S. military spending remains near historic highs. In inflation-adjusted dollars, military spending — both war and non-war — averaged \$612 billion per year during President George W. Bush's two terms in office. Under President Barack Obama, it has averaged \$675 billion. The United States will have spent nearly \$500 billion more on the military in the Obama years than during the Bush years.

The United States spends at least as much on its military as the next eight countries worldwide and nearly three times more than China and Russia combined. Although not all of that money is spent wisely, it still buys incomparable capabilities. No sensible American should wish to trade places with any other country on earth. The U.S. military is second to none, and our massive economy is a solid foundation for generating military power when it is needed..

In the current strategic environment, the United States could easily spend less and still safeguard America's vital interests. It could do so through smarter spending, eliminating wasteful gold-plated programs such as the F-35, and demanding greater burden-sharing from allies. At present, U.S. security guarantees to wealthy allies cause them to underprovide for their own defense, meaning they have less capacity to help us deal with common security challenges.

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen warned that debts and deficits represent threats to not just our fiscal health but our national security as well. Although military

spending is not the primary driver of the nation's massive and unprecedented fiscal imbalance, primacy's high costs undermine our economic security.

Such expenditures might still be justified if they were instrumental in keeping Americans safe. But, in fact, primacy is based on a number of faulty premises, including: (a) that the United States is subjected to more urgent and prevalent threats than ever before; (b) that U.S. security guarantees reassure nervous allies and thus contribute to global peace and stability; and (c) that a large and active U.S. military is essential to the health of the international economy.

Primacists hold that the United States cannot adopt a wait-and-see attitude with respect to distant trouble spots. They believe that the security of all states are bound together and that threats to others are actually threats to the United States. Primacists believe that instability and crises abroad will adversely affect American interests if they are allowed to fester. "The alternative to Pax Americana—the *only* alternative—is global disorder," writes the *Wall Street Journal's* Bret Stephens, with emphasis. Because any problem, in any part of the world, could eventually threaten U.S. security or U.S. interests, primacy aims to stop all problems before they occur.

This assumption is based on a very selective reading of world history, grossly exaggerates the United States' ability to control outcomes, and underplays its costs. It also miscasts the nature of the threats that are facing us.

Technology has not evaporated the seas, allowing large land armies to march across the ocean floor. Meanwhile, potential challengers like China face more urgent problems that will diminish their desire and ability to project power outside of their neighborhood. They can cause trouble in the South China Sea, but that does not mean they can or will in the South Pacific or the Caribbean. China's economic troubles and rising popular unrest, for example, could constrain Chinese military spending increases and focus Beijing's attention at home. Causing problems abroad would threaten critical trading relations that are essential to the health of the Chinese economy.

Primacists argue that we cannot rely on oceans to halt nuclear missiles that fly over them or cyberattacks in the virtual realm. And terrorists could infiltrate by land, sea, or air, or they could be grown right here at home. But our own nuclear weapons provide a powerful deterrent against state actors with return addresses, and a massive, forward-deployed military is not the best tool for dealing with terrorists and hackers. The hard part is finding them and stopping them before they act. That is a job for the intelligence and law enforcement communities, respectively. And small-footprint military units like special operations forces can help as needed.

There have always been dangers in the world, and there always will be. To the extent that we can identify myriad threats that our ancestors could not fathom, primacy compounds the problem. By calling on the United States to deal with so many threats, to so many people, in so many places, primacy ensures that even distant problems become our own.

Primacy's other key problem is that, contrary to the claims of its advocates, it inadvertently increases the risk of conflict. Allies are more willing to confront powerful rivals because they are confident that the United States will rescue them if the confrontation turns ugly, a classic case of moral hazard, or what MIT's Barry Posen calls "reckless driving."

Restraining our impulse to intervene militarily or diplomatically when our safety and vital national interests are not threatened would reduce the likelihood that our friends and allies will engage in such reckless behavior in the first place. Plus, a more restrained foreign policy would encourage others to assume the burden of defending themselves.

Such a move on the part of our allies could prove essential, given that primacy has not stopped our rivals from challenging U.S. power. Russia and China, for example, have resisted the U.S. government's efforts to expand its influence in Europe and Asia. Indeed, by provoking security fears, primacy exacerbates the very sorts of problems that it claims to prevent, including nuclear proliferation. U.S. efforts at regime change and talk of an "axis of evil" that needed to be eliminated certainly provided additional incentives for states to develop nuclear weapons to deter U.S. actions (e.g., North Korea).

Meanwhile, efforts intended to smother security competition or hostile ideologies have destabilized vast regions, undermined our counterterrorism efforts, and even harmed those we were ostensibly trying to help. After U.S. forces deposed the tyrant Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq descended into chaos and has never recovered. The civil war in Syria, and the problem of the Islamic State in particular, is inextricable from the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. The situation in Libya is not much better — the United States helped overthrow Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011, but violence still rages. The Islamic State, which originated in Iraq, has now established a presence in Libya as well, provoking still more U.S. military action there. It is clear that those interventions were counterproductive and have failed to make America safer and more secure, yet primacists call for more of the same.

Lastly, primacists contend that U.S. military power is essential to the functioning of the global economy. "U.S. security commitments," explain leading primacists Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "help maintain an open world economy and give Washington leverage in economic negotiations." The United States sets the rules of the game and punishes those who disobey them. If the United States were less inclined to intervene in other people's disputes, the primacists say, the risk of war would grow, roiling skittish markets. But such claims exaggerate the role that U.S. ground forces play in facilitating global trade, especially given the resiliency and flexibility of global markets in the face of regional instability. Moreover, primacists ignore the extent to which past U.S. military activism has actually undermined market stability and upset vital regions. Smart alternatives to primacy feature a significant role for the U.S. Navy and Air Force in providing security in the global commons while avoiding the downsides of onshore activism.

In conclusion, America's default foreign policy is unnecessarily costly and unnecessarily risky. Its defenders misconstrue the extent to which U.S. military power has contributed to a relatively peaceful international system, and they overestimate our ability to sustain an active global military posture indefinitely.

The United States needs an alternative foreign policy, one that focuses on preserving America's strength and advancing its security, and that expects other countries to take primary responsibility for protecting their security and preserving their interests. America's leaders should restrain their impulse to use the U.S. military when our vital interests are not directly

threatened while avoiding being drawn into distant conflicts that sap our strength and undermine our safety and values.

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