

America the Hyperpowerful

We involve ourselves all over the world despite facing few security threats. What if it had turned out differently?

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Just days after announcing that North Korea no longer posed a nuclear threat to the United States, the Trump administration decided that Pyongyang in fact still does pose a threat. So American sanctions against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea will continue. Just think of the horror that might have befallen our nation if the sneaky NORKs had gotten the drop on Washington!

At least, that appears to be the premise of American foreign policy at the moment. The U.S. is uniquely vulnerable and perpetually at risk. That means Washington must forever be at war, treating other nations' enemies as our own.

During the Cold War, Washington's adversaries included the Evil Empire, aka the Soviet Union, and mad Mao Tse-tung's revolutionary paradise, along with a gaggle of Eastern satellite states conscripted by the Red Army. Revolutionary Vietnamese and Korean forces engaged in bitter civil wars, and a potpourri of Third World despots and guerrillas wrought instability.

At the time Moscow appeared to be a serious competitor, though it would ultimately prove to be a hollow threat. Mao's threatening rhetoric sought to paper over his Communist Party's decades of war against its own people. The People's Republic of China would ultimately decide it had more to fear from the Soviet Union than from America.

Most of the peripheral battles had only an ephemeral impact. The U.S. could not save Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland as they sought to escape Moscow's grasp, though they ultimately went free anyway. The bad guys won in Vietnam, but the Vietnamese now prefer America to China. A multitude of ferocious contests to control the world's geopolitical basket cases mattered little.

Washington's Cold War tendency of promiscuously intervening in other nations' affairs could at least be excused by the Evil Empire's looming power. However, when communism dissolved as a geopolitical reality, left in charge of little more than American academia, the U.S. reigned supreme. In terms of threats, as Gertrude Stein once said of Oakland, no longer was any there there.

America faced two different paths into the future. Democratic and Republican policymakers alike chose to glory in their omnipotence and set their hyperpower loose upon the globe. Washington attempted to do ever more: defend more nations through NATO, transform the

Middle East, relieve rich Asian states of the need to protect themselves, bring democracy to Central Asia, enforce nonproliferation worldwide, socially engineer the globe, and more.

The alternative would have been to revel in America's relative invulnerability. After all, Moscow's military capabilities and geopolitical ambitions shrank dramatically, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, the PRC discarded Maoism, and revolutionary Third World states joined the new liberal Western order. Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared that he was running out of enemies, and that only Fidel Castro and Kim Il-sung were left. Both were nasty fellows, but nothing like Stalin and Mao, and neither could do much to hurt America.

Such a policy would have turned the U.S. into an off-shore balancer of sorts, leaving European and Asian allies with the immediate responsibility of responding to potential and modest threats from Russia and China and more immediate dangers from North Korea and other Third World aggressors. Doing so also would have created fewer future obligations: without U.S.-instigated NATO expansion and war against Serbia, there probably would have been no Russian annexation of Crimea and assault on Georgia and Ukraine. Had America stepped back from micro-managing the Middle East, Osama bin Laden might have looked elsewhere for targets. No garrison in Saudi Arabia, no support for assorted Mideast dictatorships, and less reflexive backing for repressive Israeli occupation policies would have reduced terrorists' list of complaints.

Moreover, allowing the Koreans to resolve what is in essence a civil war that started 70 years ago would have allowed Washington to take a more relaxed view of the North's nascent nuclear program. Indeed, Pyongyang might have suspended that effort had its security environment not turned so negative. And even if Pyongyang had gone ahead with a nuclear program—after all, Korea was long called a “shrimp among whales”—it would have been no more threatening to America than those of India and Pakistan. Much was said about North Korea's Kim Il-sung, mostly bad, but no one thought he was suicidal, preparing an exit via nuclear funeral pyre. If American forces were no longer in South Korea, Pyongyang would have had little reason to concern itself with the U.S., let alone to threaten nuclear war.

Of course, the world turned out very differently and the latest Kim regime busily developed nuclear weapons. President Donald Trump responded by threatening to trigger a Second Korean War by attacking the DPRK. Yet no one believed that Kim intended to use his vast arsenal of between 15 and 60 nukes in a first strike on America. The real issue was fear that the U.S. would lose the ability to attack North Korea. That is, Washington had to bomb the DPRK to preserve Washington's ability to bomb the DPRK, even if there was no defense need to bomb the DPRK. Maintaining America's imperium, not protecting the homeland, was the overriding objective.

Consider the fervent establishment opposition—from liberals and neoconservatives alike—to proposals to withdraw U.S. troops from the Republic of Korea as part of a denuclearization deal. Those who last year detailed the horrors resulting from the North's nuclear weapons now tell us not to worry about a few nukes. Yet they also insist that the international order will not stand if America stops garrisoning its populous and prosperous South Korean ally, irrespective of circumstances, forever.

The president sometimes appears to understand the ludicrous claims behind America's endless defense subsidies to both Asia and Europe. Washington's partners claim to face dire security threats but expect acclaim when their military outlays hit a staggering 2 percent of GDP. If the

Baltic States and Poland really believed Vladimir Putin was planning to play the Stalin card, shouldn't they be spending 5, 10, or even 15 percent? Shouldn't they create a tough territorial defense that exacts a high price from any invaders? Instead, they complain, whine, and demand that Washington station troops on their territory. They believe their survival is Americans' responsibility.

So what security threats does the U.S. actually face?

Forget Moscow. Russia has returned to a pre-1914 imperial power. It wants to be respected, have its interests considered, and make its borders secure, but there is no indication that Putin has any interest in attacking Europe's periphery, let alone the rest of the continent, and certainly not the U.S. Moscow's treatment of Ukraine is brutal and wrong, but it is largely a reaction against foolishly aggressive allied policies, most notably our ignoring previous commitments not to expand NATO eastward. Russia differs from Washington on issues such as Syria, but that doesn't even rise to an important concern for America.

The U.S. has few security worries in Africa and Latin America either. Absent both the capacity and intent to strike America's homeland, forces there do not pose a threat. The Middle East matters ever less, given America's energy resurgence. Israel is a regional superpower, and despite hysterical Saudi-inspired scare-mongering, Iran has neither amassed nor is capable of amassing an empire. Syria is a tragic irrelevancy. Washington's ally Saudi Arabia is the most repressive, dangerous, and irresponsible state in the region.

Asia matters more, but only China poses anything approaching a military threat to America. And such a confrontation would not be over U.S. territories—no Chinese task force will be heading east to capture Pearl Harbor anytime soon. Rather, the challenge arises from Washington's attempt to dominate East Asia along the PRC's border, something of great interest to Beijing. Better for America to stay back and encourage the development of an informal coalition to constrain China. That means maintaining friendly relations with India and ending a needlessly hostile policy toward Russia. Pushing Moscow toward Beijing for no purpose—Russia won't return Crimea outside of a war, which would be devastating for all concerned—is one of the Obama and Trump administrations' dumber policies.

Early America's nonintervention in the Old World's conflicts was seen a necessity due to the new nation's weakness. Today, strategic independence is a prudent strategy made possible by America's strength. Little truly threatens the United States, and that which does can be deterred. Like North Korea.

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