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America's Foreign Policy Status Quo

Less noticed amidst these crises, however, has been a broader shift in American foreign policy that could have equally great and possibly longer-lasting implications. The Obama presidency may mark the beginning of a new era in American foreign policy and be seen as the moment when the United States finally turned away from the grand strategy it adopted after World War II and assumed a different relationship to the rest of the world. - [Robert Kagan, January 2010](#)

Unnoticed amid the sniping in Washington over health care and the wailing about "broken government," a broad and durable bipartisan consensus has begun falling into place in one unlikely area: foreign policy. Consider the fact that on Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran -- the most difficult, expensive, and potentially dangerous foreign challenges facing the United States -- precious little now separates Barack Obama from most Republican leaders in and out of Congress. - [Robert Kagan, March 2010](#).

To March-edition Kagan, Obama's embrace of the status quo is a good thing, an indication that the administration is now more responsible and attuned to American interests. The alternatives before the president, he writes, are all non-starters:

Most Americans today simply don't believe there is safety to be found in a Fortress America. The fact that deadly attacks can be hatched in faraway places, including in failed states that many Americans can't find on a map, has discredited even more temperate calls for a retrenchment of U.S. overseas involvement. Republicans are more interventionist today than they were a decade ago. In 2000, Condoleezza Rice, then candidate George W. Bush's top foreign-policy advisor, spoke for many Republicans when she denigrated "nation-building" and complained that the 82nd Airborne should not be used to help Bosnian kids get to school. Today most Republicans support manpower-intensive counterinsurgency strategies that include nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. The difference is 9/11.

One of the problems with this is that it's pegged entirely around a false choice: the status quo or Fortress America. This ignores an entire range of policy options between the interventionism that Kagan champions and "fortress America." I take a "Fortress America" policy to mean a sharp restriction in free trade, a dramatic reduction in immigration and a complete military withdrawal from the world. That's certainly nothing I'd endorse. It's not even what arch non-interventionist Ron Paul endorsed. Many analysts who routinely warn about over-stretch and over commitment (like the good people at the Cato Institute) want open borders and even more liberalized free trade.

So the constituency for a Hermit Kingdom is imperceptible. But there alternative approaches available to the Obama administration, ones that do not see the need for complete global dominance and intrusive international meddling as essential for our security. One that wants to preserve alliances, but reform them to reflect the emergence of rising powers and stronger economies now capable of underwriting a larger share of their security. One that wants to retain some forward military power, but not in regions that clearly do not want it and are reacting violently against it (read: the Middle East). One that wants a sensible adjustment that better positions America for the 21st century, and not for 1946.

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