

Commentary

The Good Country

By Tim Kane
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President Obama's foreign policy of disengagement has been shattered by the events of the past year. His conviction that a retrenched United States would be better for Americans at home and for people around the globe has only invited aggression, from the Middle East to Europe to the Pacific. The animating ideas behind Obama's policies have been called into question: the beliefs that "military solutions" are always inferior, that American troop deployments are tantamount to occupations, that multilateral compromise is more moral than decisive unilateral action, and that America's enforcement of world order does more harm than good.

Obama is actively uncomfortable exercising American power abroad, but he is entirely comfortable exercising centralized power at home. He believes that a strong central government is a moral force inside the United States, but he does not believe that American power is a force for good outside our borders. He is especially certain that American "boots on the ground" don't do anyone any good—not us and not the countries to which they are deployed.

This is wrong. Indeed, it is tragically wrong. Having compared growth and development indicators across all countries of the world against a database of U.S. "boots on the ground" since 1950, I've discovered a stunning truth: *In country after country, prosperity—in the form of economic growth and human development—has emerged where American boots have trod.*

Unique among dominant powers in world history, America intervenes in the world not merely to advance its own narrow interests but to forward a greater good. And that is due in large measure to the belief that the greater good is in America's national interest—that a freer and more prosperous world is one in which the United States will flourish.

After the Second World War, the United States established "what we might call a global economic and security commons," in the words of former Secretary of State George Shultz. Billions of poor people experienced economic development thanks to their own efforts—and thanks to the Pax Americana that enabled them to do so. Without America, world economic output would not have grown from \$5.1 trillion to \$70.2 trillion in 70 years. World population would not have quintupled after 1950. And child mortality would not have been cut by two-thirds.

Critics call it empire. Academics call it hegemony. Some of its champions have called it unipolarity. But the data show a distinguishing feature beyond those descriptions: The projection of *universal liberty* has been the beating heart of U.S. foreign policy. But not for this president. At West Point earlier this year, Obama declared: "To say that we have an interest in pursuing peace and freedom beyond our borders is not to say that every problem has a military

solution... U.S. military action cannot be the only—or even primary—component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.”

Our power is a “hammer”—in his view, a destructive tool. But is that really what a hammer is? Hammers are tools for *construction*, not destruction. In that sense, the metaphor works very well. Indeed, from 1950 to 2010, more than 30 million U.S. troops were deployed around the world, the vast majority to allied countries, stationed in permanent bases, and cooperating in peace. They were building, not destroying.

The cases involving sustained military intervention get all the attention, but they are exceptions to the rule. Critics who focus on them see the scale of America’s global footprint, but they do not see the scope.

In a typical year over the past half-century, 19 countries hosted more than a thousand American soldiers. Japan, Korea, and Germany are the best known hosts of American military bases, but most people are unaware that U.S. soldiers lived in Bosnia, the Philippines, and Italy (host to 10,000 U.S. troops per year for more than 60 years).

American troop deployments overseas from 1950 to 1989 (the Cold War era) averaged 610,453 per year. During the “peace dividend” decade that followed, the total force strength shrank by two-fifths, from 2.5 to 1.6 million (then shrank again in the most recent decade to 1.4 million). Boots on foreign ground declined abruptly in the decade after 1990 to only 258,709 before rising again to 357,236 between the years 2002 and 2012.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, most troop deployments were not to countries at war—the sole exception being the years from 1966 to 1970, the height of the war in Vietnam. In the 1980s, 300,000 American forces were stationed in European allied countries, 100,000 in Asian allied countries, 5,000 in Turkey (a NATO ally), and 9,000 in Panama.

What happened in the places where American military personnel put down roots is nothing short of astonishing. The most dramatic stories are, of course, those of Germany and Japan, which the United States cultivated into financial superpowers after they had been crushed in the war. The most remarkable story is South Korea’s. Average per capita income in South Korea climbed from \$1,500 in 1953 to \$27,000 in 2013. The U.S.-allied South was much poorer than the Stalinist North, and autocratic rule was the norm for decades—but in the long run, economic freedom led to breathtaking prosperity and, later, a robust liberal democracy. Credit goes to the South Koreans, to be sure, but its American alliance, the provision of an authentic security umbrella, and tens of thousands of Americans on the ground prepared the way to a better future.

Statistical analysis reveals that countries allied with the United States flourished while other countries did not. One startling finding in a study I conducted with Garrett Jones of George Mason University is that countries hosting more American forces experienced much faster economic growth than their peers—roughly 1 percentage point per year.

And that’s after accounting for all the other variables that matter for growth.

This is no small claim. Economists have studied the factors associated with economic growth perhaps more intensely than any other question. So when a new variable is proposed, it must pass robustness tests. This one has, by maintaining statistical significance in explaining growth when hundreds of other variable combinations are considered as well (such as the starting level of GDP), and also where high-growth outliers such as Korea, Japan, and Germany are not included. American troop deployments, across hundreds of regressions, proved statistically and economically significant.

A second example: non-economic development. It turns out that allied countries with a greater U.S. troop presence experienced better outcomes on measures of life expectancy and children's mortality. This effect held even for countries growing at the same rate. Furthermore, it held during two distinct eras, pre- and post-1990.

Life expectancy worldwide increased by 10 years between 1970 and the present. But it improved *more quickly* in countries that hosted American troops, and more slowly elsewhere. The worldwide mortality rate of children dropped from 132 to 55 per 1,000 live births during the same period, but again, the results were better among America's allies. Statistical tests show that a tenfold increase of U.S. troops during a 20-year period in a typical country improved the reduction in children's mortality by 2.2 percentage points and improved life expectancy gains by 1 percentage point. (One factor, interestingly enough, was an increased number of telephone lines in countries with a heavy U.S. troop presence, which ensured connections between rural communities, health-care workers, and supplies that extend lives.) These relationships are statistically significant, even when controlling for initial GDP per capita, conflict, and economic aid. American troops made the difference.

These results are not due to the fact that an American military presence provides more dollars to the host countries. The effect of American deployments seems to be nonlinear—meaning that each additional soldier has a decreasingly positive impact. The correlation between economic growth in a country and the number of U.S. troops stationed there is 0.20, and it is even lower for troops per capita, but the correlation between growth and the log of troops is 0.49. That means that an increase of one order of magnitude—whether it's 50 to 500 GIs or 100,000 to 1 million—has the same effect.

From this we can infer that the presence of U.S. troops is less about “nation-building” in terms of Keynesian stimulus and more about ideas—the spread of notions such as property rights, investment security, and rule of law.

The means by which troops enhance growth and human development are not fully understood, but one channel is surely the effective deterrence of interstate violence. Harvard University psychologist Steven Pinker has drawn attention to the dramatic reduction in war deaths since 1945. This “Long Peace” was initially credited to the bipolar standoff during the Cold War that prevented brushfire wars across the globe. But even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, deaths due to interstate and even civil wars continued to decline.

The data demonstrating that American troops are a source of economic, political, and life-enhancing betterment are real, global, and durable over many decades. This is not a theoretical

construct. And properly understood, the finding can help America shape better strategic engagement in the future.

Note here that I am not talking about the times America has staged emergency interventions for humanitarian reasons—the case in which our “good nation” behavior is most immediately apparent. In early January 2010, a massive earthquake in Haiti displaced millions and nearly collapsed the government there. Within days, the U.S. Air Force had opened the main airport and was managing more than 100 inbound aid flights daily. Over 13,000 military personnel were rapidly deployed that month to Haiti. In 2004, one of the largest earthquakes ever recorded created a tsunami in the Indian Ocean and was followed by a global disaster-relief effort led by the Navy as well as nearly a thousand relief flights by Air Force cargo aircraft.

The standard way to discuss foreign policy is in terms of how it serves the national interest—the maintenance of commercial interests abroad, the protection of nationals in other countries, and as a check against the ambitions of others. But time and again, conventional definitions of national interest are insufficient when it comes to capturing the impetus and drive for American action outside our borders. In 1999, Bill Clinton did not conduct a 48-day air war over Kosovo to boost the stock price of Lockheed Martin or to protect American access to mineral deposits. He did so to prevent a genocide on the European continent, partly out of a national feeling of shame that we had done little to prevent the genocide that took place in Rwanda a few years earlier. In this way, as in many others, America’s foreign policy transcends the classic understanding of national interest as it has been understood since the European powers signed the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

It then follows to ask, Is this transcendent foreign policy good or bad for the United States? In the wake of the Iraq War’s unpopularity, the answer for many is no: “If the history of the past 20 years teaches us anything,” Harvard’s Stephen Walt has written, “it is that forceful American interference of this sort just makes these problems worse.” Realists like Walt are disquieted by any principle of international engagement based on something more than narrow and naked self-interest. They dislike the impetus for “meddling” and “adventurism” and prefer the constrained vision of John Quincy Adams by which America “goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.”

The realists are not the only objectors. More important, perhaps, are those on the left and the far right who believe America’s transcendent foreign policy is immoral, and that we are acting not on behalf of good but on behalf of an imperialist ideology of vague but offensive provenance. For them, American foreign policy is characterized by disgusting staged photos of prisoners in an Iraqi jail on a single night, or a single massacre carried out by a small platoon in a Vietnamese village in 1968 at a time when a half million Americans were in that country, or by support for unsavory dictators at various points over the past 70 years. In this view, our power has made us monstrous.

Another common objection to a robust American military presence in the world is that it is financially unsustainable, especially in our current economic state. There is steady support for belt-tightening, and concerns about budgetary excess exist even beyond the Tea Party and traditional budget hawks. In October, Gallup polling found that three out of every four voters

considered the federal deficit very important. And yet, earlier in the year, Gallup also found “no broad consensus among Americans that the U.S. is spending too much or too little on the military.” This suggests that the deep national concern about federal spending does not apply in the same way to the military.

The reason for that is simple: The argument that America’s military spending is a fiscal trainwreck waiting to happen is simply not true. Even proponents of reducing military expenditures admit as much. In a 2012 paper for the libertarian (and markedly anti-interventionist) Cato Institute, two scholars acknowledged that “foolish” U.S. military-spending patterns were in fact “sustainable.”

The reality is that U.S. defense expenditures have declined from 9–10 percent of GDP in the 1950s and ’60s to 6 percent in the ’70s and ’80s to 4 percent in recent decades. What’s unsustainable is not the budget, apparently, but the willpower to stay engaged. As Justin Logan and Benjamin H. Friedman wrote: “That such a small slice of American wealth accounts for nearly half the world’s military spending shows how cheap military hegemony has become for Americans.”

Perhaps it is this common characterization of Pax Americana as a hegemony that we need to examine. If we approach the historical record with care, we can see that the American story since the Second World War is hardly imperial, nor is it a story of hegemony. It is something new under the sun. U.S. military interventions have come, in all cases, in situations with limited benefit to the American bottom line.

There was no material advantage to saving South Korea, a bloody and costly war that ended well. And there was nothing to be exploited in Vietnam, an even bloodier and more costly war that ended badly. In these cases, America was determined to counter Communist aggression, and not merely for its own citizens. As Ronald Reagan said in the famous “A Time for Choosing” speech 50 years ago, “We cannot buy our security, our freedom from the threat of the bomb, by committing an immorality so great as saying to a billion human beings now enslaved behind the Iron Curtain, ‘Give up your dreams of freedom because to save our own skins, we’re willing to make a deal with your slave masters.’” America’s presidents and her soldiers were willing to make selfless sacrifices for the liberty of others. This is not hegemony.

I would suggest that the unlearned lesson of the Cold War is not that Communism was contained but that Communism was outgrown. The prosperity created through free-market development in American-allied countries stood in sharp contrast with the slower growth in centrally planned neighboring economies. West Germany outgrew the East, and everyone knew it. Beijing eventually changed course when the success of capitalism in Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore, and Hong Kong could no longer be denied. (In one of the key moments before he announced the policy of *perestroika*, Mikhail Gorbachev famously went on a tour of a Canadian agribusiness, asked how many workers it took to harvest the fields, and was told, to his shock and shame: none.)

For 40 years, the United States enforced global peace through strength. Following the posture of calm leadership established by President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s, the Cold War was called cold because the confrontation never broke into direct hostilities. We nurtured our allies

and waited. It is said that good fences make good neighbors, but in a global neighborhood of crumbling fences, it will be good neighbors that win over old enemies. Countries that profit from American values have no need to ally with an oppressive Moscow or Beijing against the United States. Rather, they share our interest in protecting a free and prosperous global order, and serve as bastions of stability and opportunity. This approach resulted in important bilateral security agreements with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and other countries where American troops have left their mark. It's tempting to criticize what foreign-policy analyst Michael Mandelbaum has called "foreign policy as social work," but few among us would prefer to live in a world untouched by American beneficence.

What lessons can we draw from this? How can this Good Country shape the 21st century? A long, patient commitment to engaging with allies across the spectrum of hard and soft power is one obvious bedrock value we must uphold to expand the "peace and security commons" for the next generation. Understanding that there may be little short-term national interest in investing time and treasure in Africa should not dissuade us. But setting aside the controversial role of America in nurturing freedom and democracy, we should recognize the simple calculus of forward deployment of U.S. armed forces in hot spots *before* they boil over. The Baltics are a top priority, followed closely by a focus on the Philippines and others in the South Pacific (some of this is under way in Australia). A case can be made that engaging more directly in both Central and South America will help turn around the developmental stagnation of the past decade.

It would be a mistake to read the evidence about the positive impact of troop deployments as a clarion call for, simply, *more*. Indeed, that is the confused, instinctive reaction of many to the empirical reality of the troops' effect. Let's think about this from the economist's perspective of supply and demand. A strategy of pushing troops to poor, unstable countries is not the way this policy works. Rather, the history of seven decades of hard-power engagement shows that the United States respected the "demand side" of the relationship. When France in the 1960s and the Philippines in the 1990s wanted U.S. forces out, out they went. The troops' effect is empirically positive precisely because recent history is dominated by allies such as South Korea and Japan and dozens of other nations that wanted and still want forward deployments of U.S. troops. Indeed, the biggest mistake is for a president to get caught up in seeking out and hammering enemies, because the U.S. military is arguably the softest power at its disposal.

And what of the Middle East? Ask yourself: Which nations in the Middle East are true allies? Israel, to be sure. Others are treated more as acquaintances. The public never hears the president talk about Jordan, Kuwait, Turkey, or Egypt the way that Cold War presidents talked about Korea, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, the Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, and Taiwan, just to name a few. Supporting allies should be our priority when it comes to engagement. Focus on the positive, constructive engagement first, and let our shared interests guide the fighting, together.

But given the realities of the Middle East, pinning America's engagement strategy on Israel (population: 8 million) is the equivalent of pinning the Cold War effort in Europe from 1945 to 1989 on a single alliance with Belgium (population: 11 million). Supporting the one true democracy in the Middle East is paramount, but it is not enough.

Where are Air Force, Army, Marine, and Naval bases welcomed? Where are American soldiers allowed and encouraged to mix and mingle and marry? When troops are deployed to Asia, their assignments are long and the bases are open. By contrast, tours of duty in the Middle East are short, in bases that are secreted bubbles. These things matter. We will know the “good country effect” is taking place when American troops in the Middle East no longer live like astronauts on a moon colony but rather co-exist with the people they are there to defend and help.

The tangle of relationships among Middle Eastern states (and non-states) is complex and fragile, you might say. Was it any different in 1950s Asia, where our closest allies in Tokyo, Seoul, and Manila had been bitter enemies? The complexities in 1960s Indochina or the Balkans in the 1990s rival our era as well. The bottom line is that America’s engagement has been successful even when its war record is mixed, and the successes point to a strategy of strong support for our allies, cultural and economic openness, investing in human development, and above all—*patience*.