

Obama's national security blueprint: Little hope, less change

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President Obama made a clear and laudable statement in the cover letter to his National Security Strategy, released on Thursday: "The burdens of a young century cannot fall on American shoulders alone."

"Unless we find ways to get other countries to step up," a senior Obama administration official told journalist David Ignatius a few days before the NSS release, "we're in trouble."

Well, we're in trouble.

The NSS does not correctly identify what prevents other countries from "stepping up," and it lacks a realistic strategy for convincing them to do so. Our military has been deployed for at least the past two decades in ways that have discouraged other countries from doing more to defend themselves. Sheltered under the American security umbrella, our allies have plowed resources into other pursuits, often with Washington's blessing.

If we were serious about getting other countries to do more, we would prepare for the U.S. to do less. The Obama administration has done the opposite, submitting Pentagon budgets nearly double those of the '90s and maintaining our commitments to defend rich allies worldwide.

Advocates of our current strategy often go to elaborate lengths to conceal the true object of U.S. military power. The military status quo is protected by a patronage system in which a plurality of representatives in Congress has a parochial stake in spending programs that in no way serve our broader security interests. We don't need to spend \$700 billion a year to keep this country safe; our security challenges are far less serious than that of many other countries around the world, and manageable at far less cost. The U.S. is protected by two vast oceans, has no fear of its neighbors, and possesses an array of diplomatic assets and military capabilities that enable us to deploy forces on short notice virtually anywhere. That would remain true even if the administration were serious about shifting resources out of the military.

Instead, Obama's security blueprint builds upon the flawed assumptions of his predecessors, ignoring—in fact, undermining—that which makes us strong.

Most egregiously, the NSS reiterates U.S. responsibility for defending countries with their own regional security headaches. The Founders explicitly limited our likelihood of being involved in foreign wars by investing the war powers in the Congress, but the post-9/11 national security framework hands these decisions over to the executive branch, or, worse, to our allies and "partners" who might engage in reckless behavior and draw us into wars without the consent of the American people.

Advocates of our current foreign policy contend that the international economic order might come crashing down without the omnipresent U.S. military threatening random pirates and fraudulent operators. A better strategy would build on the more plausible assumption that the international economic order is far too complex, and the scale of transactions far too great, to be policed by a single superpower, no matter how large and intrusive. A new grand strategy, built around these very different assumptions about our interests and the way the world works, would require U.S. policymakers to separate and prioritize urgent concerns from less urgent or irrelevant ones, and focus on devolving many of our current military obligations to other countries.

A sensible foreign policy is conducted according to a clearly articulated set of priorities. It is unclear what priorities guide the NSS. For all of the talk of burden-sharing in the NSS, there is precious little discussion of burden *shedding*. At a minimum, the administration should have differentiated between those threats that *we* must address, and those that are best left to others.

The NSS fails to do that, and its frequent invocations of American leadership signal that the Obama administration anticipates that the U.S. will *always* be involved in every possible security challenge around the globe.

To the extent that the U.S. military has performed reasonably well as the policeman for the world, that is a credit to our men and women in uniform, not to the policymakers in Washington who sent them on too many dubious missions in too many peripheral places.

It is good that the president and his key foreign policy advisers are beginning to appreciate our limits. But old habits are hard to break, and the new NSS does nothing to forge a more realistic and sustainable strategy for America.

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